

## **Uncivil Society in Digital China: Incivility, Fragmentation, and Political Stability**

### ***Introduction***

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Once believed to empower a range of Chinese social actors, the Internet is increasingly linked to expressions of extreme incivility that violate the etiquette and norms of interpersonal and online communication. Moving beyond definitions of civility (or incivility) based on democratic norms of deliberation and reciprocity, this article argues that civility should be reconceptualized as respect for others' communicative rights, including the right to self-expression in pursuit of social justice. This theoretical modification affirms that civility differs from politeness and allows for contextualized and comparative studies of civility and incivility across regions and polities. In China's authoritarian online spaces, the state tacitly encourages incivility as a divide-and-rule strategy while masking its uncivil purposes with "civil" appeals for rationality and order in a society characterized by pluralism, fragmentation, and visceral conflict. The result, as contributions to this Special Section illustrate, is a toxic uncivil society in which the space for respectful civil debate is narrowed, the influence of social groups and regime critics is diminished, and state power becomes more concentrated and resilient.

*Keywords: civility, incivility, uncivil society, China, social justice, politeness*

This Special Section invokes the term "uncivil society" to characterize the rise of myriad forms of disrespectful, polarizing, and hateful speech that violate the rules of etiquette and norms of behavior for face-to-face and online communication (Jamieson, Volinsky, Weitz, & Kensiki, 2017). We argue that incivility results in confusion and disorder (Pye, 1999) but that it can also provide stability for governments that use divide-and-rule strategies to keep society in check. We focus on incivility in authoritarian China and its impact on public discourse online, but this Special Section may also have

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relevance to long-standing democracies, including the United States, which is experiencing rife incivility and partisanship.

Definitions of civility and incivility and discussions of their roles in democratic societies remain contested (Jamieson et al., 2017). Whereas some see civility as a social norm (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004), a cornerstone of civil society (Shils, 1997), and a barometer of a functional democracy (Pye, 1999), others have expressed concern over the restrictions that civility imposes on public debates (Schudson, 1997), decried the instrumental use of civility to silence communication pertaining to social justice (Calabrese, 2015), and observed that an insistence on civility, for instance, by the left in contemporary American politics in the face of attacks by the far right, is readily perceived as weak and ineffectual (Bennett, 2011). A growing literature in communication recognizes that civility and incivility are complex, contextual, and cultural concepts (Jamieson et al., 2017) that intersect with notions of (im)politeness (Papacharissi, 2004) and (in)justice (Calabrese, 2015).

We argue that respect for the right of others to self-expression and self-representation is a baseline criterion for civility. Recognizing that others are entitled to air their views—despite disagreements over the opinions per se—aids in the development of social capital (Pye, 1999), whereas widespread incivility impedes the growth of civil society. To the extent that incivility silences or undermines those who would contribute to public debates, it breeds resentment, polarization, apathy, and preference falsification (Kuran, 1995).

Civility differs from politeness, with the latter being understood as good manners and etiquette (Papacharissi, 2004; Weller, 1999). When civility is viewed as respect for others' speech rights, it can even include speech that is impolite or rude but which helps expand public discourses and debates without rejecting the speech rights of others. Conversely, polite speech can be profoundly uncivil when it disqualifies others' rights to speech, denies self-representation, threatens violence, or suppresses perspectives. We hope these conceptual modifications clarify the characteristics of civility and incivility and make them more readily applicable to comparative analysis.

In China and other authoritarian systems with highly regulated boundaries for public discourse, civility that contests state policies, ideology, or legitimacy can be subject to condemnation through propaganda, sanctioned public ridicule, uncivil attacks by proxy, and censorship. The extent to which people are permitted to engage in civil exchanges or to voice uncivil views are political questions for which the state serves as the final arbiter. Although impolite discourse related to individual economic interests in the Chinese context may be seen as legitimate, civil online postings regarding the merits of democracy, civil society, and universal human rights are not and are subjected to censorship or uncivil criticism.

The articles appearing in this Special Section draw attention to the following subjects: the Chinese government's instrumental use of *civilization* and *civility* to demobilize the emotions of online activism and to "civilize" the Chinese Web to legitimize state authority and its governance of the Chinese society; the denigration of Chinese public intellectuals by an increasingly plural and fractured Chinese Internet population following unsuccessful attempts by authorities to disempower liberal public intellectuals and to curb the growth of civil society in China; Chinese Internet users' misogynistic attacks

on a Japanese porn star seeking to improve Sino-Japanese relations; and ethnographic analyses of civil and uncivil online practices ranging from the harassment of a German social media celebrity who joked about Chinese cultural icons to a “sticker war” waged by Chinese netizens on Facebook against Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen. In China’s authoritarian online spaces, this particular mix of state civilizing discourses and raging societal incivility is conducive to the formation of an uncivil society that weakens the appeal of civil discourse, silences critics of the central government and its policies, and perpetuates state power.

### **Reconceptualizing Civility and Incivility**

Civility can be understood as a social norm “based on widely shared beliefs [about] how individual group members ought to behave in a given situation” (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004, p. 185). As such, the literature recognizes that civility is both cultural and situational, making it difficult to settle on a general definition applicable to all circumstances. What is impolite and uncivil in some places may be acceptable in others. Jamieson and colleagues (2017) point out, however, that most definitions of civility tend to agree that “civility connotes a discourse that does not silence or derogate alternative views but instead evinces respect” (p. 206). The object of respect can be individuals such as fellow citizens engaged in an online forum, the content of public debates (e.g., Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004; Shils, 1997), or much broader “collective traditions of democracy” (Papacharissi, 2004, p. 267). Conversely, incivility has been construed as either disrespect for discursive counterparts (e.g., name calling, swearing, hyperbole, vulgarity) or the denial of the rights of others to self-expression (e.g., the use of denigrating stereotypes), the spread of misinformation, and the blocking of compromise with people who disagree (Muddiman, 2017).

Although politeness and civility or impoliteness and incivility have been used interchangeably in popular and scholarly discourses, some scholars have endeavored to differentiate them as distinct concepts. Papacharissi (2004) defines “politeness as etiquette-related, and civility as respect for the collective traditions of democracy” (p. 260). She argues that civility orients individuals to think of themselves as members of a society and allows them to transcend the individual. When considered in relation to democracy, civility should be distinguished from politeness, the latter based largely on etiquette, formality, courtesy, and manners. This has led some scholars (e.g., Muddiman, 2017) to theorize that incivility can be differentiated on two levels: personal-level incivility based on politeness theory and public-level incivility based on democratic deliberation theories. The differentiation between politeness and civility (and impoliteness and incivility) is valuable, as discourses that may be perceived as rude in interpersonal or public exchanges could express civil dissent that does not violate others’ rights or forsake a commitment to listening and compromising. Likewise, discourses cloaked in politeness and good manners that strip away other individuals’ rights should be recognized as uncivil (Papacharissi, 2004).

The need to differentiate politeness and civility also stems from a concern that interchangeable uses of the two concepts have led to the exploitation of civility to control society, suppress free speech, silence the weak, and perpetuate injustice. Elias (1939/2000) fears state uses of civility to impose order and to supplement a monopoly on the use of violence. Strachan and Wolf (2012) argue that civility can function as an apparatus for silencing subordinate groups by enforcing “norms of politeness” (p. 41). “The civility movement,” Kennedy (1998) writes,

is deeply at odds with what an invigorated liberalism requires: intellectual clarity; an insistence upon grappling with the substance of controversies; and a willingness to fight loudly, openly, militantly, even rudely for policies and values that will increase freedom, equality, and happiness in America and around the world. (p. 85)

Echoing Kennedy, Calabrese (2015) opines that civility—politeness and decency, in this case—has turned into “liberalism’s disease” and at times eclipses more fundamental principles such as social justice. Just as politicians’ calls for tolerance and civility among participants in the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements bespoke hypocrisy (Wolff, 1965), we argue that civility, not politeness, needs to be grounded in a pursuit of social justice—that is, justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, privilege, and opportunity within a society. Upholding norms of politeness in the face of injustice is unreasonable and potentially counterproductive. Thus, we reconceptualize civility as respect for others’ rights to freedom of speech and peaceful association, including the right to self-expression in pursuit of social justice, a definition applicable to a wide range of sociopolitical contexts, including China.

### **Civility and Incivility in China**

Adapting civility and incivility—concepts that emerged in relation to Western traditions of democracy and deliberation—to the Chinese context poses special challenges. China does not have democracy as understood by the discipline of political science or by the standards of internationally recognized democratic polities. Instead, the world’s most populous country is governed by a Leninist party-state that is constitutionally above the law and provides limited protection for individual rights and speech freedoms, with restricted institutional avenues for political participation. The Chinese government is, however, generally responsive to public opinion and seeks to act on behalf of what it perceives as public interest to maintain stability (Tang, 2016, p. 159; see also Weller, 2008). Similar to their Western counterparts, Chinese citizens and netizens engage in private and public discussions of important or trivial issues of the day in manners and ways that can be thought of as civil or uncivil (Jiang, 2010, 2016).

Rather than locating civility (or incivility) in democratic norms of deliberation and reciprocity, we treat respect for others’ rights as an alternative mooring point. This repositioning opens the door for comparative work on civil and uncivil discourses and interactions beyond democratic contexts, so considerations of different orientations toward rights, justice, and self-expression can yield fresh insights. Chinese conceptions of rights traditionally pertain to socioeconomic security rather than to the inalienable rights of individuals vis-à-vis the state, as in the Anglo-American tradition (Perry, 2008). The surge of rights consciousness in late 20th century and early 21st century China (Goldman, 2005; O’Brien & Li, 2006) relates primarily to the legitimation of the right of individuals to pursue material well-being and, concomitantly, to the right to self-expression to attain it, if not to the full array of political rights available to citizens in democratic societies.

Rights consciousness in China manifests itself in numerous areas. It includes limited individual rights and collective demands related to land and real estate, pensions, health care, consumer rights, labor rights, environmental rights, identity rights, and so on. Rights consciousness often finds expression

in online debates too, as Yang (2009) observes: “The defense of personal rights and interests and the expression and assertion of new identities are central concerns of the new citizen activism” (p. 27). Rights defense (*weiquan*) and online rights defense (*wangluo weiquan*) peaked between 2004 and 2010, a period perceived to be “China’s closest encounter with digitally networked democracy and civil society with increasing collective efficacy” (Qiu, forthcoming). Social protests during this time were characterized by struggles of the weak against the rapacious, the powerless against the powerful, and by progressive social forces demanding rights, freedoms, and justice against social elites and political authorities. Consequently, public discourses not only pushed for socioeconomic rights but also for the expansion of freedom of expression as a vehicle to obtain the very material welfare that authorities promise to deliver to the citizenry.

Further, orienting discussions of civility and incivility toward social justice, instead of democratic deliberative norms, makes it possible to interrogate the purposes that uncivil discourses serve in China and elsewhere. Granted, what is just or unjust varies over time and by context, yet considering the outcomes of deliberation (“substantive justice” in terms of rights and equality in wealth, privileges, and opportunities) rather than the process of deliberation (“procedural justice” in terms of deliberative norms; Rawls, 1999) draws attention to the ends instead of the means of discursive engagement when evaluating what may be (im)polite or (un)civil. This is especially pertinent when civility is exercised to legitimize domination and suppress voices of the weak (Calabrese, 2015).

Similar to the concept of “rights,” Chinese conceptions of “justice” have traditionally focused on socioeconomic welfare, or “distributive justice” (Munro, 2000, 2001), rather than legal justice based on individual rights as in the Euro-American tradition. Such an emphasis creates much more room for a developmental state in the management and allocation of resources (Perry, 2008). However, social justice also lies at the heart of socialist ideology in contemporary China’s history (Wong, 2004). After all, removing foreign oppression, capitalist exploitation, and private ownership in China’s march toward communism since the 1920s was supposed to build a prosperous and just society. Since the transition from Maoism to market capitalism in the late 1970s, social justice continues to figure prominently in popular and official discourses as the state propaganda advocates “socialism with Chinese characteristics” to create a “well-off society” (*xiaokang shehui*) as living proof of socialism’s superiority.

Social justice, *shehui gongzheng* or *shehui zhengyi* in Chinese, is closely tied to discourses of equality, equity, and fairness that are primarily concerned with income distribution, employment, health care, and trade and labor practices (Wong, 2004). During China’s tumultuous 40-year post-Mao reform era, punctuated by the 1989 Tiananmen incident, increasing income inequality and endemic bureaucratic corruption have given a sharp rise to a discourse of social justice that the state may eventually find socially and politically destabilizing. Efforts by the government and societal groups to address social injustice have contributed to strident online public debates and sometimes incivility characterized by Hu (2008) as “a rising cacophony.”

### Civility and Incivility on the Chinese Web

At 772 million (Chinese Internet Network Information Center, 2018), Chinese Internet users today are far more diverse than the tech-savvy liberal elites who first went online in the 1990s and early 2000s. Politically apathetic, populist, and extremely conservative individuals have joined China's netizenry (Damm, 2007; Le, 2014; Pan & Xu, 2015; Wu, 2007). Their self-representation thus challenges, on the one hand, a presumed dichotomous opposition between state and society, and on the other, the implicit assumption of a liberal subject demanding social justice, media freedom, and political reform. Echoing Leibold (2011), who argued that "much of the optimism that pervades current writing on the Chinese internet seems premature and possibly misplaced" (p. 1026), we argue that it is important to explore a wider range of actors and dynamics that have shaped China's digital spaces.

Some online incivility is state sponsored, but it can also be netizen initiated. For instance, the "50 cent party" (*wumaodang*), or state-funded, pro-government commentators, is a well-documented phenomenon (Han, 2015b; Hung, 2010). Since 2004, 50 centers numbering in the millions have flooded Weibo (Chinese microblogging) and other Chinese online spaces with regime-supporting views, breeding confusion and discord. They lurk online to promote the priorities of the party, guide public opinion during crises, divert netizens' emotions, and quell public criticisms and "rumors" (Han, 2015b). Their tactics and discourses often involve cheerleading on behalf of the regime (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2017) but can be uncivil regarding real or imagined opponents of the ruling party.

The "voluntary 50-cent army" (or *ziganwu* in Chinese), on the other hand, consists of individuals who voluntarily defend the regime and criticize anti-regime netizens. Han's analysis (2015a) reveals that this group's opinions both converge with and diverge from official discourses. On the one hand, this group is unselfconsciously patriotic and skeptical of the West, prone to berating Western governments, Western media, Chinese dissidents, and liberal intellectuals. On the other hand, voluntary 50 centers are critical of China's propaganda system, which they deem to be incompetent and corrupt. They have circulated humorous narratives online such as "The Little White Bunny's Glorious Past" to extol the Party's role in unifying the nation and fabricated stories to trick the gullible, the ignorant, and even major newspapers into publishing false information (Han, 2015a). Their tactics, both playful and self-branded as "rational," defy a clear-cut categorization on the civil-uncivil spectrum. Although it is possible to argue that their praise of the central government's actions to improve governance and public welfare is civil, the group's tendency to combatively delegitimize netizens they see as irrational, uninformed, or harboring favorable opinions of the West tends to disqualify their opponents from participating in public debates entirely (Han, 2015a) and thus are quite uncivil. What is remarkable about this group is that given its relatively neutral stance toward state propaganda, its endorsement of popular nationalism, and its emphasis on rationality, its members "are often more effective at influencing netizens than state agents" (Han, 2015a, p.1021). Overall, voluntary 50 centers have contributed to the fragmentation, polarization, and incivility of Chinese cyberspace.

In addition to 50 centers and their volunteer variant, prominent public figures have contributed to an uncivil online environment. A salient example is the New Four Arch Evils, a label referring to Kong Qindong, Zhang Hongliang, Sima Nan, and Wu Fatian, four ultranationalists notorious for espousing anti-

Western, xenophobic, populist, and neo-Maoist messages (Jiang, 2016).<sup>1</sup> Kong, a professor of Chinese at Peking University and a remote descendant of Confucius, was videoed deriding Hong Kong residents: "As far as I know, many Hong Kong people don't regard themselves as Chinese. Those kinds of people are used to being the dogs of British colonialists—they are dogs, not humans" (Burkitt, 2012, para. 3). Kong refused to apologize and defended his comments as "free speech."

Incivility manifests itself on the Chinese Internet not only through such extremist characters but also in the online comments and behaviors of liberal-leaning intellectuals. The transformation of public opinion toward Chinese public intellectuals, as Rongbin Han notes in his contribution to this Special Section, is a case in point. The concept of a "public intellectual" (or *gonggong zhishifenzi*, *gongzhi* for short) was popularized in China by a 2004 *Southern People Weekly* feature story as "knowledgeable, progressive and critical individuals who actively engage in public affairs" ("Yingxiang Zhongguo," 2004, para. 2). By 2012, however, the newspaper had to admit that "public intellectual" had become an epithet associated with intellectually incompetent public figures who harbor ill intentions and irresponsibly attack people at will. The spectacular debate between popular Chinese blogger Han Han and social critic Fang Zhouzi carried out live on Sina Weibo polarized and disappointed millions of Chinese netizens, confirming widely held cynicism about public intellectuals.

Han Han is a literary figure, race-car driver, and media celebrity whose blog was followed by tens of millions of readers. At age 27, he made *TIME* magazine's 2010 *TIME* 100 list for his witty criticism of China's political and cultural establishment as the voice of his generation (Jiang, 2016). Fang Zhouzi rose to prominence for exposing fraud, including a revelation that the former president of MSN China, Tang Jun, had faked his PhD. The 2012 Fang-Han "war of words" concerned the authenticity of Han's written work, which Fang argued was the product of ghostwriters and promoters. Name-calling by people in both camps went on for months while the absence of hard evidence rendered the dispute inconclusive. The uncivil exchanges between Fang, Han, and other public intellectuals disillusioned millions of fans and discredited Chinese public figures (Gao, 2012). As Han's article in this Special Section demonstrates, admiration for public intellectuals plummeted, following the failure of earlier attempts by authorities to sap the influence of public intellectuals.

The dispute concerning Chinese public intellectuals was but the tip of the iceberg that revealed an increasingly fragmented and polarized society. Clashes online in some instances have even morphed into street fights: The dramatic "Weibo brawl" between Wu Fatian and Zhou Yan sparked by exchanges on Sina Weibo is one such example. Known by the handle Wu Fatian online, Wu Danhong, a professor at Beijing University of Political Science and Law, earned the moniker of "Advanced 50 Center" for his steadfast cheerleading on behalf of the central government. Wu's post on July 3, 2012, in favor of building a metal refinery in Sichuan so enraged the Sichuan TV reporter Zhou Yan that Wu and Zhou agreed to a fistfight in Beijing's Chaoyang Park (Jiang, 2016). Viral videos of the confrontation showed famed liberals, including the famous artist Ai Weiwei, slapping Wu Fatian ("Ai Weiwei Hitting Wu Fatian," 2012), thus contributing

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<sup>1</sup> This and the following four paragraphs contain content that has been adapted from Jiang and Esarey (2015) and Jiang (2016).

to sympathy for Wu, vilification of liberals (those seeking political reform and the protection of civil rights), and cynicism about public figures generally.

While the Chaoyang Park fight was patently uncivil, it is a useful reminder that the labels “incivility” and “civility”—both cultural and contextual—must be applied with care to controversial situations and public figures (see Jason Ng and Eileen Han’s article and Gabriele de Seta’s contribution in this Special Section). Artist Ai Weiwei, for instance, is a provocateur who has posed nude for photographs in a vulgar, humorous, veiled critique of Party leadership (Jiang, 2016). Ai also created a work of art called *Study of Perspective* in which he points his middle finger toward such iconic sites as the Tiananmen, the Eiffel Tower, the White House, Trump Tower, the Colosseum in Rome, da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, the Shanghai waterfront, and Gaudí’s Sagrada Familia church in Barcelona. Ai Weiwei’s art may be improper or impolite, but it is civil for creating debates about politics, art, and society without impeding other perspectives. Authorities’ efforts to stop Ai Weiwei from investigating the collapse of poorly constructed school buildings that led to the death of students during the 2008 Sichuan earthquake—including police harassment and an assault on Ai that resulted in brain injury—were profoundly uncivil despite being carried out for the ostensibly civil goal of maintaining social stability.

### Civil and Uncivil Society

China’s particular mix of state “civilizing” techniques and societal incivility has facilitated the formation of an uncivil society in which critical voices have been questioned, weakened, or suppressed and state power becomes more centralized. Acknowledging the boundaries between civil and uncivil society are fluid and fuzzy at times, we see China’s uncivil society as one in which individuals and social groups frequently engage in uncivil discourses and exchanges that breed discord and confusion, weaken the respect individuals have for others’ opinions and rights, diminish the authority of government critics, and perpetuate state power. The Chinese state maintains the capacity to serve as the referee and final arbiter of intrasocietal conflicts. In addition, foreign and domestic Internet companies that submit to, rather than challenge, state demands for censorship and propaganda contribute to the emergence of uncivil society.

As others have pointed out, civility is foundational to various conceptualizations of civil society based on free association, good governance, or deliberation in democracies (Edwards, 2011; Shils, 1997; Putnam, 2000). When civility in public discourse breaks down, discord, polarization, and confusion may ensue, thereby weakening individuals’ respect for others’ rights, diminishing voices of government critics, and bolstering state power. Widespread spikes in incivility can dampen the growth and influence of civil society.

Civil society as a concept in the social sciences, although long contested, has had persistent appeal. It has been viewed as critical to democratization in Eastern Europe, East Asia, and Southeast Asia (Pye, 1999), and its decline seen as evidence of the degradation of America’s democracy in the late 20th century (Putnam, 2000). Edwards (2011) defines civil society as “the sphere of uncoerced human association between the individual and the state, in which people undertake collective action for normative and substantive purposes, relatively independent of government and the market” (p. 4). Scholars view civil society respectively as (a) associational life to form voluntary organizations; (b) good society effective

in addressing poverty, discrimination, and other social ills; and (c) the public sphere where issues concerning the public can be debated to reach political consensus.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan used the term “uncivil society” in 1998 to refer to “the terrorists, criminals, drug dealers, traffickers in people and others who undo the good works of civil society” (quoted in Kopecky & Mudde, 2003, p. 10). Although Keane (1998) has pointed to the use of violence as setting apart civil and uncivil society, uncivil speech can serve as a concrete form of incivility and merits inclusion into a broader concept of uncivil society that we seek to advance.

Critics of earlier uses of the term “uncivil society” have found it conceptually vague as a catch-all term for a wide range of disruptive, unwelcome and threatening elements deemed to have emerged in the spaces between the individual and the state, and which have become increasingly difficult to control and regulate, particularly when they extend across national borders (Rumford, 2001, para. 5). Given the unsettled debate over civil society—with scholars adopting various definitions and measurements—some scholars (e.g., Bob, 2011) have been critical of the related concept of uncivil society.

Despite earlier objections, we redeploy the concept of “uncivil society” in part to emphasize the importance of civility to civil society, as the latter will fail to thrive unless founded in a context that enables respect for others’ rights to self-expression and self-representation. In agreement with scholars such as Mouffe (1999), we do not view civil society as having a unified voice. Far from it, we argue that civil society is composed of diverse and at times cacophonous groups and associations with disagreements over interests, experiences, values, and worldviews. As such, a baseline measure of civility—respect for others’ speech rights—is requisite for healthy associational life and a vibrant public sphere to emerge in diverse polities.

### **The State Role in China’s Uncivil Society**

The irony of the emergence of China’s uncivil society is that it has coexisted with state-sponsored “civil” and “civilizing” discourse (see Yang’s contribution in this Special Section). Over the last decade, Chinese authorities have espoused middle-class lifestyles (*Xiaokang shehui*), harmonious society (*Hexie shehui*), peaceful development (*Heping fazhan*), and the China dream (*Zhongguo meng*), while preventing the efforts of intellectuals to advocate progressive political reforms, defend the prisoners of conscience, advocate media freedom, and argue for the improvement of policies affecting ethnic minorities.

State-sponsored “civil” discourse is the product of the public dissemination of propaganda in the context of systematic information control. Central and local state institutions, corporations, and thousands of paid and unpaid citizens police public discourse and then report and remove heterodoxy. State-led information control is far from monolithic or omnipotent. Yet the capacity to repress elements of an emergent civil society, especially when it challenges state power, and to expunge the expression of rival political views suggests that the state could do much more to dampen civility or incivility if doing so served the interests of the ruling party. In addition, the 50 centers mentioned above have targeted the opponents of state positions and such iconoclastic prodemocracy figures as Han Han and Ai Weiwei, thereby revealing state preferences for uncivil treatment of regime critics in public debates. Overall, the

big picture is one in which the regime bolsters its legitimacy by pursuing a divide-and-rule strategy while frustrated reformers, idealists, and spectacle makers duke it out, figuratively and in Chaoyang Park literally, to the horror and delight of spectators online. Meanwhile, Internet service providers and advertisers benefit from traffic that politically permissible controversy attracts. When the voices of civil society are shouted down by extremists and tarred by exposure to visceral intrasocietal conflict, uncivil society serves as a source of authoritarian stability.

One goal of reconceiving uncivil society is to draw attention to the difficulty of strengthening or even sustaining civil society in the presence of extreme incivility. Scholarly literature on Chinese civil society has focused on development of civic organizations and associations offline (Gao & Yuan, 2008; Howell, 2011; Huang, 1993; Simon, 2013; Teets, 2014) and online (Tai, 2006; Yang, 2003) with little attention to the normative value of civility for the development of civil society (Kluver & Powers, 1999). Without respect for others' rights to self-expression and self-representation or tolerance for a pluralistic society, civil society will struggle to survive. Chinese legal scholar Liang Zhiping argues, "Of the various elements of civil society, what matters to contemporary Chinese society the most is perhaps not individualism, nor civil society's independence and autonomy from the state, but civility, pluralism and rule of law" (2001, para. 44). Echoing Shils (1997), Liang framed civility as a willingness to compromise amid conflicting interests and an identification with the idea of a civil society.

Early scholarship by Guobin Yang (2003) and others argued that the Internet facilitated the growth of China's incipient civil society. Recent changes, however, suggest that the Internet has facilitated the formation of an uncivil society as well. Although the Internet has connected individuals and groups seeking public fora for discussion and debate, it has also created spaces for radicals and celebrities with extreme views to thrive. The effects of state control and hypercommercialization have been noted above, but societal incivility such as online bullying and indecencies can also impact an incipient civil society online in China (e.g., Jiang, 2016; Yang, 2003). With Chinese Web spaces growing more polarized and theatrical, participants and observers of online spectacles have become more cynical and alienated.

Under Xi Jinping's leadership since late 2012, China entered a new era of "the return of ideology" (Yang, 2014, p. 109), characterized by further curtailing of social movements, civil rights, and online expression, culminating in a turn toward "personalistic rule" with the removal of constitutional term limits for President Xi (Shirk, 2018). Civil associations in China remain bound to state authority through a system of mandatory supervision or operate illegally and with uncertain status (Simon, 2013; Teets, 2014). The fear that social associations could undermine political stability or serve as subversive agents of foreign regimes has prompted the current leadership to erect numerous obstacles to the development of civil society and eventually to ban the use of the term entirely in state media in addition to universal values, free press, civil rights, the bureaucratic capitalist class, the Party's errors in history, and judicial independence, known together as "seven forbidden" topics (Buckley, 2013). A new national security law that took effect in 2017 further restricts the funding, activities, and influence of foreign nongovernmental organizations in China (Shieh, 2017), a move perceived to be China's march toward an uncivil society ("Uncivil Society," 2015). Overall, the combination of state "civilizing" techniques, corporate complicity, and societal incivility has precipitated a climate in which state power has become more concentrated while dissenting voices have been weakened and muted.

### Contributions to the Special Section

The impetus for this Special Section emerged from presentations on the theme “(un)civil society” for the 2015 Chinese Internet Research Conference hosted by China Institute at the University of Alberta and co-organized by authors Ashley Esarey and Min Jiang, although additional submissions for the project were solicited. The articles appearing here develop, expand upon, and critique the preliminary considerations of uncivil society in China presented at the conference and at a subsequent retreat for participants in Jasper, Alberta. Guobin Yang’s article (this Special Section) makes a particularly important contribution to this Special Section, and to Chinese Internet studies more generally, by offering a Foucauldian analysis of the Chinese government’s instrumentality of “civilization” and “civility” to curtail online activism in recent years. It does so through the notion of governmentality, positioning “civilization” as an ideological discourse to legitimize the governance of the Chinese society and “civility” as a strategic tool or technology. Not only does the article trace the historical roots of “civilization” and “civility,” particularly in contemporary Chinese history, it also offers a comprehensive analysis of specific technologies adopted by the government to civilize the Web, including the discourse of civility in relation to law and order, cybersecurity, civility campaigns, model websites and model citizens, civility volunteers, online opinion surveys to measure civility, and civility watchers. It demonstrates with specificity how civility has been systematically used by the Chinese government to promote a particular vision of the Internet in China, often resulting in the stifling of dissent and critical voices. The article offers a critical perspective on civilization and civility that is important to any dialogue or debate on online (in)civility of the Chinese Web.

Rongbin Han’s article (this Special Section) examines the denigration of Chinese public intellectuals by an increasingly plural and fractured Chinese Internet user population despite failed attempts by authorities to disempower public intellectuals. The concept of public intellectual valorizes individuals willing to criticize state authorities and stand up for less empowered members of Chinese society. In 2004, *Southern People Weekly* identified 50 such people. Considering the newspaper’s proliberal editorial stance, unsurprisingly, many of the intellectuals were long-standing advocates of political reform and greater speech freedom, journalistic freedom, freedom of association, and other civil rights. Han argues that the subsequent state-sponsored effort to silence public intellectuals through published commentary in official media gained little traction, but the online politicization of foibles and disputes from 2011 on involving public intellectuals did. Popular nationalism served as the primary source of public dissatisfaction with public intellectuals, rather than the public’s opposition to their political views per se. The successful branding of public intellectuals’ dissent as pro-West, entitled, excessively critical, and anti-China weakened the authority of their generally civil attempts to direct the public toward proreform perspectives. Thus online denigration, bookended by state-led attacks on public intellectuals and magnified by scandals, largely silenced individuals once hailed as the champions of China’s disempowered. Score another win for the party-state and the cybernationalists whose incivility supports the resilience of Chinese Communist Party rule.

Jason Ng and Eileen Le Han’s article (this Special Section) examines a rare corpus of texts emerging from more than 200,000 reader reactions on Sina Weibo (a Twitter-like Chinese microblogging platform) to posts by Japanese porn star Sora Aoi about improving Sino-Japanese relations after

widespread protests in China in response to the Japanese decision to nationalize the Senkaku (Diaoyu in Chinese) islands, a small island chain claimed by Japan, China, and Taiwan. Aoi's postings attempted to assuage tenuous bilateral relations, accompanied by calligraphy stating "good relations between Japan and China" and "good relations between the Chinese and Japanese people." The obscenity-filled responses to Aoi's message on Sina Weibo were overwhelmingly misogynistic and intensely anti-Japanese. In analyzing the profoundly uncivil comments, Ng and Han found many of them to be "phatic," related more to group solidarity (i.e., standing with those who stand up for China's sovereign claims) than to substance (i.e., informational exchange to further discussion). Such sentiment reflected a collectively expressed uncivil identity vis-à-vis Aoi's effort to promote calm and friendship at a time of bilateral crisis. Although the extent to which censorship affected the sample is unknown, the fact that the Communist Party permitted incivility to rage in the manner that it did suggests that the state saw the public's reaction as unifying, possibly risky to delete, and politically useful to send a signal to Japan that sovereignty disputes were not a matter on which the Chinese government could compromise (Weiss, 2014).

Last, Gabriele de Seta's article (this Special Section) argues that Chinese online civility and incivility are socially constructed by Internet users themselves in relation to their everyday lives, media practices, and events. Rather than offering prescriptive definitions of civility and incivility, he maintains that it is more important to understand their situated practices and meanings. His article draws from four first-hand accounts of *bu wenming* (uncivil) online discourses and interactions. The first case involves the harassment of a foreign social media celebrity in China, Christoph Rehage, whose distasteful joke about Chinese cultural icons Lei Feng and Hua Mulan having a baby triggered vicious attacks from Chinese nationalists, including harassing calls to his German mobile phone. The second case describes the "sticker war" waged by Chinese to "invade" (by spamming) the Facebook page of newly elected Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen, who has rightly or wrongly been associated with advocacy of Taiwan independence. The third narrative provides a vignette of social media chats about Chinese civil society, patriotism, Maoism, Chinese leadership, the irreconcilable opposition between Chinese leftists and rightists, and the demise of critical thinking in China. In the fourth case, De Seta reports on BBS forum users' responses to his question, "Which are the most prominent *bu wenming* incidents on the Chinese Internet?" These highly contextualized ethnographic accounts offer an in-depth look into the psyche of netizens inhabiting Chinese cyberspace and their varied interpretations of civility and incivility. Collectively, they raise questions and debates about incivility and its connection to the development of uncivil society.

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