

Matrix of Free Spaces in China: Mobilizing Citizens and the Law Through Digital and Organizational Spaces

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How do digital communicative spaces facilitate legal mobilization, an emerging genre of social activism in China? What strategies do activists pursue in these spaces to sustain their resistance? Using a 2015 case study in Xiamen, Fujian Province, where an environmental nongovernmental organization led a lawsuit in the name of “pedestrians’ rights,” I seek to address these questions. This exploratory research illustrates how activists appropriate a “matrix of free spaces” available to them—a hybridized intersection of relatively stable organizational and digital spaces—for everyday organizing and for disseminating “citizenship talk,” so that participants mobilize as citizens who invoke the law to effect policy change. It also reveals a snapshot of how collective solidarities may persist under authoritarian rule as well as the broader possibilities and challenges accompanying civic activism in China.

Keywords: lawful activism, safe spaces, mobile communication, environmental NGOs, WeChat, China

While spectacles of mass protests in authoritarian China have been stealing headlines, an alternative genre of social activism, “mobilizing without the masses” (D. Fu, 2018, pp. 20–21), has been growing quietly on the sidelines. Instead of assembling individuals to form mass demonstrations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) propagate “pedagogies of contention”—coaching small groups of participants to contend as individuals and empowering them to project a counternarrative that asserts their rights as citizens.

Lawful activism marks a crucial representation of mobilizing without the masses in China. It encompasses “advocacy strategies that are couched in the language of rule of law, and seek to attain and publicize [information], and/or press for remedial action, through existing courts, laws, and legal procedures” (Yew, 2018, p. 225). As of March 2018, 25 environmental NGOs (ENGOs) have taken

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Date submitted: 2018–04–23

¹ I thank the editors and the two anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions for this article. I am also grateful to Fei and her colleagues at the Green Volunteers for their kindness and generosity. An earlier draft was presented at the XIX ISA World Congress of Sociology, Toronto, 2018.

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advantage of provisions on public interest litigation under the amended Environmental Protection Law, taking polluting firms to court in as many as 252 cases ("Shehui zuzhi," 2018). In addition to initiating lawsuits, other legal measures include using regulations on disclosure of official information to collect data from state agencies and applying for administrative review over controversial development. On the one hand, these strategies mark a departure from the usual ENGO tactical repertoire of awareness campaigns and policy entrepreneurship (Mertha, 2008; Yang & Calhoun, 2007). On the other hand, they reflect the ENGOs' ongoing reservations about mobilizing the masses, opting instead to hold the state accountable under the shelter of rule of law. Lawful activism is then inflected with the imperative of both observing the law and instrumentalizing the law to seek social change. But how have digital communicative spaces facilitated this type of contention? What are the microstrategies in these spaces by which activists carry out pedagogies centered on invoking the law?

To address these questions, I deploy a 2015 case study in Xiamen City, Fujian Province, China, where an ENGO, Green Volunteers (GV), launched a crowdfunded campaign to "Defend Pedestrians' Rights" (*weihu xingren luquan*) by coordinating lawsuits against local government agencies.² Fei, the founder-leader of GV, brought a suit against a street-level government office (*jiedao banshi chu*) in Xiamen, because the pedestrian sidewalk she used to travel to work had been turned into parking spaces for motorists. She asserted that the gross narrowing of the walkway had forced her to walk on the road, burdening her with additional daily traffic risks, and "as a citizen of Xiamen," she had a legitimate right to full mobility on the walkway. The lawsuit, along with another challenging the selective enforcement by traffic police over parking on a walkway section, demanded restoring the walkway spaces to uphold Fei's rights as a pedestrian and urban citizen. This seemingly individualized legal challenge disguised a dynamic collective process animated by the dual goals of popularizing the notion of pedestrian rights and influencing urban mobility policy. Although Fei lost all the suits in the end, the action marked an important activist experiment with the legal arena that brought together lawyers, environmentalists, journalists, and ordinary people.

The legal campaign was as much a project to seek policy change as a pedagogical process fostering an oppositional collective consciousness of participants' rights as "Xiamen citizens." Citizenship is a suite of rights that arises from a contested process pitting civil society against the powerful rather than a status awarded by the state (Somers, 1993). In a similar vein, the legal campaign is a contestation over urban citizenship, specifically the "right to the city": the right to "reshape the processes of urbanization" (Harvey, 2008, p. 23) and to remake the city. Law is a cultural resource that dresses up such bottom-up agitation as "impeccably respectable demands" (O'Brien, 2001, p. 426) and a means by which symbolic resistance against hegemonic norms plays out (McCann, 1994). By activating the law, participants learn by doing the vocabulary of citizenship rights. They embark on a self-transforming trajectory from "media citizenship," which entails constructively engaging with new media, to "active citizenship" (Yu, 2006). Put simply, an active citizen evinces a sense of efficacy and is willing to openly confront and assert her interests against the powerful, because she practices notions of "self-help, self-

² Names of persons and organizations here are pseudonyms. For more details on the campaign, see Yew (2018).

rule, and self-capacity building” (Wu & Yang, 2016, p. 2060). Insofar as media citizenship relates to “talking” about the rights to know and speak, active citizenship requires “walking the talk.”

To that end, the GV activists, I argue, have deftly suffused what I term a “matrix of free spaces”—a hybridized intersection of relatively stable organizational and digital spaces—with “citizenship talk,” socializing members into ways of active citizenship and mobilizing them to partake in lawful activism. In terms of digital spaces, I will focus on the use of WeChat (*Weixin*), a free, homegrown mobile application developed by the tech giant Tencent that integrates instant messaging and social networking features. In terms of organizational spaces, I will examine the role of activist meetings at the GV headquarters. They are “free spaces,” because they represent small-scale settings that are “removed from the direct control of dominant groups, are voluntarily participated in, and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies” a social movement (Polletta, 1999, p. 1). This is not to suggest WeChat was the only digital technology deployed but that it resembles more the traditional free spaces that are imperfectly shielded from direct surveillance, since its Group Chat feature functions as a trustworthy “semiprivate, but networked space” for activist interactions (Guo, 2017, p. 423). Activist meetings, on the other hand, are organizing spaces (Haug, 2013). As the organizing center, their meetings are an autonomous action space facilitating face-to-face contact, experience sharing, and activity coordination among other participants (Lacey, 2005).

A matrix structure, according to management studies, entails cross-functional organizational overlays (Ford & Randolph, 1992). By the same token, a matrix of free spaces is constituted by overlays of different spaces operating on separate logics, which is unlike the concept of hybrid spaces, whose emphasis is the social fact of interconnection between the physical and the virtual (Castells, 2012; Marolt & Herold, 2015). Scholarship tends to focus on studying one single physical social site that is relatively free from control and surveillance by power holders, such as religious rituals, organizational meetings, and student dormitories (Glass, 2010; Scott, 1990; D. Zhao, 2004). In China, these social sites manifest as “relatively safe spaces” (D. Fu, 2018, p. 3) or “safe-enough spaces” (Stern & Hassid, 2012; Vala & O’Brien, 2007) for civil society members to recruit, evaluate state responses, and coach contention. By invoking a matrix of free spaces, my contribution to this literature lies in interrogating how multiple, intersecting free spaces entail multiple mutually sustaining opportunities for incubation of oppositional consciousness (Sewell, 1992) and how activists crisscross different sites as safe havens for organizing and disseminating “citizenship talk.”

Activists like Fei and her fellow campaigners, being responsible for forwarding pedagogical messages and narratives about their activism to their wider network, act as “human routers” operating and choreographing this matrix of spaces (Lim, 2018). They critically reinterpret the ongoing in the external world through their active citizenship lens to set the “emotional scene” around their campaign (Gerbaudo, 2012). And like routers in computing, they are charged with firewalling these spaces to ensure they remain free. To that end, they strike a balance “between rights advocacy and organizational survival” (D. Fu, 2018, p. 106), keeping their advocacy single-issued without resorting to overt transgression. My case study conjures a meaningful counterfactual of how on- and off-line mobilization might look if Chinese citizens, in addition to their current technological savviness, inherit a relatively stable organizational

infrastructure and veteran leadership embodied by the NGOs, demonstrating essentially how additional free spaces (re)shape mobilizational dynamics.

Matrix of Free Spaces

Why Free Spaces?

Free spaces are typically sequestered social settings for relatively autonomous popular activity (Evans & Boyte, 1992). They are where a “subaltern counterpublic” (Fraser, 1990) readily rehearses “hidden transcripts” (Scott, 1990)—counterhegemonic discourses that take place beyond direct view of power holders. Various guises of counterhegemonic talk, such as “coffee-shop talk” (Nonini, 1998) or “kitchen talk” (Johnston, 2005), have suggested an intricate link between place and talk as well as a vital means by which politicized narratives and imaginaries can be constructed. Indigenous community institutions, such as places of worship and community associations, for example, have been found to be key sites for the cultivation of oppositional identity and frames that precede mobilization (Morris, 1984).

Contemporary social movements have nonetheless complicated the classic definition of free spaces. Powered by the saturation of communication technologies, they are less hindered from storming the public stage and colonizing existing spaces to create free communities and enact their imaginaries. These networked movements seek to carve out an autonomous communicative space consisting of interactions between digital networks and occupied physical spaces. The result is a hybrid space, where digital and physical spaces are less oppositional categories than they are inextricably linked (Álvarez de Andrés, Zapata Campos, & Zapata, 2015; Castells, 2012; Juris, 2012). However, such insights are derived from observations of social movements whose main tactic is occupying notable symbolic urban spaces. The understanding of hybrid spaces is then predicated on activism relying on overt noninstitutionalized means or spontaneous direct action. It also privileges hybrid spaces that are public, or “spaces of appearance” in which a movement makes itself visible to its opponent (Lim, 2018, pp. 115–116). Clearly, the analysis lacks consideration for the kind of activism practiced by the GV volunteers, whose objective was less a performative display of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment in some public space than an inward process of mustering support for their viewpoints, or “consensus mobilization,” within relatively safe confines (Klandermans, 1984; Tilly, 2004). As such, the concept of free spaces remains salient, and especially so in authoritarian settings where speech and assembly are severely circumscribed.

Stability has become a watchword of the Xi Jinping administration, as he centralizes control over the Internet by heading the Cyberspace Administration of China, whose remit includes censorship and regulatory enforcement (Lv & Luo, 2018). DeLuca, Brunner, and Sun (2016) note that surveillance shapes activism, and “Chinese citizens have long known they are being surveilled” (p. 324). Indeed, Internet censorship has powerfully shaped the psychological perceptions of netizens, encouraging them to limit their online political expression (Lu & Zhao, 2018). In addition to online censorship of subjects calling for social mobilization (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013), pervasive uncertainty about the boundaries of permissibility has served as an effective control strategy that silences prospective activists (Stern & O’Brien, 2012). Even though environmentalists are not subjected to systematic crackdowns, their past personal experiences of state intimidation, and those of their activist acquaintances, have conditioned their perceptions of state

control. Fei, for instance, had been threatened with deregistration of her organization for publicizing information on a controversial industrial plant in Xiamen. She also knew personally one of the five feminist activists detained by authorities in March 2015. ENGO leaders elsewhere in China have similarly recounted suspicions of official surveillance at workplaces and incidents of being told to desist from advocating specific issues (personal interviews in Beijing, June 8, 2015, and Chengdu, September 14, 2015). When “control parables”—or didactic stories about transgression that counsel retreat (Stern & Hassid, 2012)—that incorporate these stories are exchanged with one another, an atmospheric uncertainty is diffused that necessitates, or even exaggerates, the importance of private and intimate settings as free spaces among activists. Activists use these spaces to make sense of each intimidating encounter with the state, turning the encounters into didactic stories about optimal paths of activism.

Although free spaces, similar to the Habermasian public sphere, can be a domain in which a public assembles to conduct rational debates (Papacharissi, 2002), they are generally distinct. Whereas the public sphere is the means through which public opinions usually form, free spaces are inward looking and not in the business of changing public opinions. They are akin to spaces of “social encounter that contribute to the production and reproduction of practices of social cooperation, problem solving, and social capital formation” (Douglass, 2008, p. 32). In fact, free spaces may well be a response to a dominant and unfree public sphere that excludes marginalized voices (Fraser, 1990) and where “preference falsification” (Kuran, 1995), the concealment of one’s true preferences, may be rampant.

Neither the organizational spaces nor the digital spaces discussed below could be convincingly construed as an “alternative public sphere” (Atton, 2003; Sampedro & Martínez Avidad, 2018). To be sure, WeChat can function as an alternative content distribution channel, exposing users to “controversial information and viewpoints that are critical of the official discourse,” and therefore harbors the potential of being an alternative public sphere (Guo, 2017, p. 418). There were also attempts by GV to engage with the (alternative) public sphere, such as enlisting media journalists and publishing a book on the campaign. However, this article chooses to shed light on activist work in insulated free spaces that precedes and informs efforts of engaging with the public sphere. To borrow a useful analogy, free spaces constitute the “backstage” of activism, whereas the public sphere represents the “front stage” (Haug, 2013). At the backstage, rather than reaching out to ideologically different publics, activists’ priority is motivating a formative counterpublic to carry out resistance against the state (Kubal, 1998). While it is conceivable that the specific spaces I observed may expand beyond their core group of supporters and become “public-ized,” they show more signs of retaining a quality of restrictedness characteristic of free spaces.

NGOs in China

Under the contingent toleration of the Chinese Communist Party, China’s NGOs have rapidly bloomed since the 1990s (Teets, 2014). While registered NGOs currently number more than 800,000 (“2017 Zhongguo shehui zuzhi,” 2018), counting unregistered organizations may put that figure easily over a million. By and large, these NGOs neither openly organize mass protests nor overtly challenge the party-state (Ho, 2001). Indeed, their conspicuous absence in various scholarly accounts of digitally mediated collective action is telling (Huang & Sun, 2014; Liu, 2015; Zhou & Yang, 2018). They are instead in a “contingent symbiosis” with the state: they operate with legitimacy as long as they continue to provide

useful social services (Spires, 2011). While this seems to point to their relative fragility, the flip side of the coin implies that, at least for some NGOs, owing to their relatively uninterrupted institutional continuity since the 1990s, they are repositories of decades of activist experiences, relationships, and leadership capable of informing and anchoring new mobilizational strategies.

Furthermore, the central government's increased policy and discursive emphasis on environmental protection has encouraged a "green public sphere" in which ENGOs and the media actively produce and circulate environmental discourses (Yang & Calhoun, 2007). This has led to the legal enshrinement of the obligation of public participation in environmental concerns (Moore & Warren, 2006). The ambivalence of the Chinese state toward issue activism that does not fundamentally threaten the Chinese Communist Party rule has also generated the political opportunity for popular action on environmental protection and urban livability (Stern, 2013; Yang, 2009). More recently, as part of Xi's drive to enforce clean governance and discipline local state agents, the party-state doubled down on the rhetoric of the rule of law—or, more precisely, "governing the nation in accordance with the law" (*yifa zhiguo*; Trevaskes, 2018). The Chinese Communist Party control of the judiciary centralized, while tolerance over "rights protection" lawyer activities declined (H. Fu, 2018). Despite consolidated state repression against various activists, institutionalized political participation continued largely unabated (D. Fu & Distelhorst, 2018). Indeed, amendments in 2014 to the Administrative Procedure Law and Environmental Protection Law, coupled with state propaganda and exhortations of "using the law as a weapon," signaled to NGOs possibilities to instrumentalize the law to hold local authorities accountable (Yew, 2018).

While the space for contentious activism has been foreclosed, certain NGOs are at least well positioned to coach ordinary citizens to advance their causes by exploiting legal openings in the institutionalized arena. Their organizational headquarters are a stable form of free spaces that readily double as hubs of activist pedagogy. The next section discusses how GV emerges to fulfill this role.

Green Volunteers

Founded in 1999 and registered with the civil affairs bureau in 2007, the Green Volunteers is one of Xiamen's oldest ENGOs. Funding has been a particularly challenging issue for the organization, but it has over the years received funds from local and foreign sources on a project-by-project basis. GV also has a strong collaborative relationship with academics from one of Xiamen's premier universities. In addition to having a humble size of three staff members and three interns (at the time of this research), the organization maintains a small cohort of volunteers who occasionally join its environmental projects—which range from waste sorting and recycling to river water quality monitoring. Additionally, it is part of various (inter)national NGO networks and affiliations, such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature, Friends of Nature, and Green Commuting Network.

Pedestrians' rights resonates with GV's mission, because it builds on GV's advocacy work on green commuting. To meet the long-term goal of carbon emissions reduction, the development of sustainable transport goes hand in hand with sound city planning that accommodates, if not promotes, pedestrianization and low-carbon travel. With greater awareness of how safe and appropriate road use can be enforced and adjudicated through law outside China, activists' grievances over commuting were also articulated through

the grammar of rights. Moreover, the progression of GV from holding public awareness events to using legal advocacy was driven by a growing sense that past efforts to influence urban mobility policy had generated “little effect.”³ At another level, the issue of pedestrian rights refers to the imperative of safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable group of all road users. In China, pedestrians have been disadvantaged by traffic designs that invariably prioritize motorists and by weakly enforced and nebulous right-of-way rules (Jiang et al., 2017). This resonated emotionally with the campaign participants, because it paralleled their subordinate position in the everyday politics of China and reminded them of their general experiences of bad government policies and administrative abuses.

Fei’s aim through the campaign was that others would emulate her example of invoking the law to pressure the government to rule according to law—or, in her words, “checking state power through the cage of the legal system” (WeChat conversations, September 9 and 25, 2015). Losing her suits was less important than forcing government officials to think twice about passing or enforcing inconsiderate policies.

Method

Data collection was carried out during a three-month participant observation in Xiamen between April and June 2015. As a volunteer and observer for GV’s legal campaign, I had access to various court documents, meeting minutes, and ENGO publications, which I analyzed. Additionally, I took notes on all campaign meetings and court trips I attended.

Using digital ethnography (for methodological discussions, see Varis, 2016), I collected information, discussions, and narratives on the legal action from the GV’s WeChat Group Chat and Official Account, to which I am a subscriber. As of January 20, 2017, there were 58 WeChat group members. This amounted to one year’s worth of online observations from May 2015 to May 2016, capturing the duration of the entire legal struggle.

The data from both digital and physical spaces of interactions combine to present an illustrative account of how activists operated at different levels of free spaces.

GV’s Matrix of Free Spaces

As suggested above, free spaces are often a response to state suppression of the public sphere. To limit the publicity of the lawsuits—and indirectly assert control over the public sphere—court officials banned reporters from attending the hearings. Attendees who were jotting down notes at the trial were asked whether they were journalists. And after the hearing received coverage in the press, thanks to sympathetic undercover reporters, the judge told Fei that mobilizing media attention was wrong, questioning her motives and indirectly threatening her. At the subsequent hearing, court officials intensified their precautions by requiring all attendees to disclose their identity cards and employers’ information (field observations; Fei, personal interview, June 24, 2015). Two years later, Fei faced similar censorship tactics from the authorities

³ Fei’s online narrative on December 30, 2015. Link available on request.

as she encountered difficulties securing a publisher for her book on public interest litigation and was forced to omit a case study from the book (Fei, personal communication, April 22, 2017).

These authoritarian practices have undermined NGO participation in the Chinese public sphere (Glasius & Michaelsen, 2018) and bring into stark relief the importance of free spaces for the smooth circulation of counterhegemonic thoughts and identity. They are also spaces into which activists can retreat and brainstorm countermeasures against these authoritarian practices. Without total regime control, these are spaces activists can claim as their own, and as long as their advocacy does not fall under state suspicion of threatening "social stability," state intrusion into these spaces is rarely warranted.

Following Glass (2010), daily activities within the free spaces of a civil society organization can be divided into everyday routines and political reflection. Similarly, within their organizational and digital spaces, as part of their everyday routines, GV activists engaged in practical discussions on how to advance their rights advocacy. In addition, pedagogical narratives encouraging active citizenship were circulated as part of the reflective talk that punctuated each practical discussion session. These narratives weave together components of injustice, agency, and identity, portraying a situation as an injustice that deserves shared moral indignation. They also exemplify how "'we' can do something" about this injustice committed by "some 'they' who have different interests or values" (Gamson, 1996, p. 29). Fei, as the host of the activist meetings and the administrator of the WeChat chat group, played a prominent role in leading and facilitating these activities. A free space is then necessary not only for the plotting and delegation of organizing tasks but also for the collective cognitive dynamics revolving around socializing participants into alternative ideas and values (Evans & Boyte, 1992; Polletta, 1999).

Organizational Spaces

The small meeting room at the GV headquarters was the default gathering place for the mostly Xiamen-based volunteers whose professional backgrounds included education, urban planning, media, and law. The group comprised long-time supporters and self-joining individuals intrigued by the activist project. Volunteers were assigned tasks related to the legal case, such as finding out the agencies responsible for collecting parking charges and for parking space management through regulations governing the disclosure of government information. As the host, Fei was responsible for opening and closing the meetings, imbuing herself the dominant presence to bring coherence to the inchoate interactions and anecdotes that organically arose in this space.

The meetings shifted between talk of routine maintenance work, such as publicity and funding strategies, and reflective talk, such as discussions on the state of pedestrians' protection beyond Xiamen and China. They were lively occasions animated by interactive reflections, and meetings usually lasted from two to four hours, even though the participants numbered no more than 10. Pedagogical narratives circulated at the meetings encompassed stories linked to pedestrians' rights and urban planning, sharpening the collective sense that something was amiss about the way things were. For example, Min, an urban planner, discussed the incoherence of pedestrian rights, supported by visuals of "unsound" traffic designs in Xiamen and other Chinese cities. As a frequent traveler overseas, Fei interjected with her own anecdotes

about the contrasts of “traffic orderliness” in the Netherlands and Hong Kong (meeting minutes and personal notes, May 23, 2015).

The official business of mundane updates on the progress of their tasks revealed a sense of the “us-them” divide as, for example, volunteers characterized the government’s response to their “disclosure of government information” requests as frustratingly equivocal. The meetings could veer into current affairs, as participants reacted to scandals or dramatic events outside the room, broaching the subject of perceived injustice at the hands of local authorities. For example, Zeng brought up the recent fatal police shooting of Xu Chunhe, a petitioner in Heilongjiang Province. Due to the issue’s sensitivity, state authorities had aggressively promoted official versions of the event and had censored online discussions that questioned their veracity (K. Zhao, 2015). Zeng and a few others briefly speculated about cover-ups aimed at painting the incident as a legitimate use of police force against a menacing troublemaker.

Such trading of stories that invited collective speculations signified not only the relative freedom of this organizational space but also how the free space was necessitated by the unfreedom of the online public sphere. But more crucially, it contributed, even if unintentionally, to cultivating an imagined community of victimhood linking the participants with citizens beyond Xiamen. The space became a depository for compiling vignettes about each volunteer’s unpleasant direct and indirect contact with the state into a recurring narrative about power holders who had not been held to account. By speaking to these shared perceived injustices, these narratives strengthened the participants’ oppositional identity as citizens and antagonism vis-à-vis the local state, the “arch-villain” of their own story (Polletta, 1998).

After naming these injustices and perpetrators, the narratives concluded on the theme of citizens’ agency. An example was when Fei told a story that left attendees impressed and nodding about dialing 1-1-0 (police hotline) to complain about illegal parking on the sidewalks. When the police did not arrive to take action, Fei called again, only to be treated rudely by the officer on the line. Fei then made complaints against the officer, leading to a personal apology to her days later. When she phoned again to voice a different complaint, the police arrived within five minutes. Fei ended the tale with a lesson to all in attendance: “Call 1-1-0 next time; you need to try it out to know [its effect].” To Fei and the meeting participants, it did not matter whether the ostensible change of police attitude was incidental. Fei’s story echoed the purpose of their current campaign, persuasively offering the takeaway that citizens ought to act on their grievances rather than resign themselves to the poor state of affairs. The meeting led to a spontaneous field trip to observe and measure the parking and walkway spaces of a nearby pavement, putting into immediate practice their sense of efficacy felt through talking.

Digital Spaces

Scholars have documented the resourcefulness of China’s ENGOs in appropriating digital platforms designed for commercial interests to disseminate information and network cross-organizationally (DeLuca et al., 2016; Sullivan & Xie, 2009; Wu & Yang, 2016; Yang, 2009). This section contributes to this literature by highlighting how WeChat has been deployed as a digital free space to organize action and spread the pedagogy of active citizenship. This is timely since mobile Internet users constituted 95.1% of all Chinese netizens (as of December 2016), and the significance of mobile-mediated—and, likely, WeChat-mediated—

collective action is likely to increase in China's future trajectory (China Internet Network Information Center, 2017).

WeChat's Group Chat, a chatroom-like environment for up to 500 users at one time, operates like a circle of trust, because users can only join a chat group on the invitation of an existing group member, assuring users that the possibility of direct state surveillance is remote. In fact, the joining of any new member alerts all existing members, mollifying fears of a Trojan horse. A caveat is that the system has not been spared from sophisticated keyword and image censorship (Ruan, Knockel, & Crete-Nishihata, 2017), and such platforms typically have weak privacy policies (Lv & Luo, 2018).

Like other digital platforms, the digital space exemplifies a participatory culture in which users carry out collaborative practices in content creation and sharing that translate into online civic engagement (Lim, 2013). In terms of organization, the chatroom assembled various users who offered assistance and suggestions from time to time on tactical options for the legal mobilization. The several lawyers in the group guided the volunteers' navigation of the legal system. When a volunteer who had filed a suit was requested by the court to appear, one lawyer told her to ignore the request since it could be an attempt to convince her to withdraw the suit. Environmentalists, lawyers, and former media personnel also provided prompt suggestions on various publicity efforts, such as how to make the headline of a public post punchier and how to initiate crowdfunding on WeChat. To cover the lawyers' expenses, WeChat group members donated money, and forwarded fund-raising pleas to their own social networks. As the chat group's admin, Fei performed routine tasks of occasionally purging inactive users and requesting users not to share contents unrelated to urban citizenship and pedestrian rights.

Pedagogical narratives can be reinforced through lively give-and-take conversations akin to digital collaboration. Users shared links to stories within and beyond Xiamen about citizens' litigation, right-to-the-city activism, and urban mobility issues. Fei shared information about green commuting policies overseas to build an alternative vision for traffic design in China. But as Gerbaudo (2016) notes, the euphoric receptivity and cooperation of ordinary users is what makes motivational communication work. The social interactivity of the chatroom allows users to instantaneously react to each development of the legal process. These conversational reactions (re)affirm the dominant pedagogical narrative that storytellers wish to sustain. Three snippets of WeChat conversations below demonstrate how activists rejuvenate resolve by exaggerating "the myth of agency" when progress occurs and how they withstand temporary defeats by minimizing demoralization.

A sign of apparent progress came when Fei's public post about illegal parking of police vehicles, which was unrelated to their court case, led to a personal apology from the traffic police on June 8, 2015. Taking place 11 days after the first hearing, this caused the chatroom to be abuzz with excitement. User Wu suggested: "It looks like more [bottom-up] 'monitoring' [leads to] more [state-society] interactions, and then progress." Fei echoed: "Yes . . . [the police] understood my viewpoint, and thanked me for 'monitoring' them . . . one round after another, administrative review and litigation forced the government to talk to us." Even though the incident seemed to be independent of the legal case, Fei and her colleagues portrayed them to be connected, attributing putative shifts in official attitude to their current campaign. The

account, though speculative, nevertheless reaffirmed the narrative that individual citizens can instigate changes, however small.

One setback occurred about two months after the first hearing, when the judge phoned Fei on July 9, 2015, asking her to switch the defendant from the street office to the local traffic police, hence forcing a retrial. Suspicions that the court was exempting the street government from responsibility caused an instant collective reaction in the chatroom. After a flurry of practical discussions between Fei and the lawyers about their own response to this new development, user Min sighed: "It is really difficult to win a lawsuit, [since] the jury and opponent work together [referring to the court and defendant]." User NZ responded: "[It is all in the] process; with publicity, this will stimulate societal progress; it is not about winning or losing," to which Min replied, "You will only truly understand [the effect] after taking action; nothing will happen if you never act [on issues]." Indeed, the theme that it is not about winning or losing recurred in the chatroom whenever the group was dealt a defeat. The line, while keeping the activists grounded in reality, carried an optimistic slant that the campaign would somehow spawn positive change (whether in terms of opening new pathways of activism, discouraging governmental abuses, or the more abstract furthering of "societal progress").

Another minor setback pertained to a post (dated September 9, 2015) on the WeChat Official Account (equivalent to an RSS news feed that distributes regular content to subscribers). It used the provocative title, "The people will prevail? Renminbi prevails?" (*renmin bi sheng; renminbi sheng*) to ask about an upcoming trial: Would "the people" win the lawsuit? Or would a government policy motivated by the desire to earn additional revenues win out? Appropriating a quote that "justice," "peace," and "the people will prevail" from Xi's speech at the commemoration of the anniversary of victory against Japanese aggression, the post exhibited a use of ironic, ambiguous, and metonymic frames (Thornton, 2002). However, when the post was quickly deleted by censors, speculated reasons included the title, "something" activating the trip wire of the censorship system, and user complaints to WeChat. In the end, users playfully circulated the now blacklisted post within the group and moved on.

Evidently, as with the organizational space, interactions in the digital space comprise both the practical and the reflective. The chatroom is a "mobile" support group from which activists solicit instant advice on pressing matters relevant to the campaign. It is also a virtual enclave into which members retreat, regroup, and reflect on restrictions over engagement with the public sphere, whether censorship of an online post or pushback from the court. Constantly animated by the fault line between us and them, participants embraced their disadvantaged position as citizens against the state and turned it on its head by putting forth an alternative script on citizens' agency. For instance, a participant posted that the whole campaign was to "make [state officials] suffer" for disrespecting the rules (WeChat conversation, October 16, 2015). Even minor achievements, such as the short-lived moment of humiliating and exposing local authorities in court, gave rise to giddy expressions of "[this is] very fun" in the chatroom. What was considered fun was simply an exercise of agency against the state's apparent infallibility, as unresponsive officials appeared uncharacteristically flustered and had to climb down to meet the citizens' demands. The activists' sense of efficacy, then, is not only a theoretical prerequisite for active citizenship but also the very reward they sought to reap through active citizenship.

Discussion

What distinguishes the organizational space from the digital is, first, its dedicated function of organizing limited to a core group of volunteers; by contrast, organizing in the digital space tends to pivot around speedy troubleshooting that depends on the collective wisdom of a diverse chat group. The second distinction is the extra layer of trust present in the face-to-face setting and the direct physical link to the ENGO itself. This point is salient, since trust is particularly hard to gain through online anonymous communication (Gerbaudo, 2012; Haug, 2013). Indeed, Fei could look at the participants and state at the activist meetings that “we have nothing to hide; even if police authorities were here, they would see that, too” to emphasize the innocuous nature of their action and assure attendees about the protected space they were in (meeting notes April 23, 2015).

The differing logics of each free space can be observed based on what was communicated or otherwise across these social sites. Moving stories about Xu Chunhe and police unresponsiveness were shared in the organizational space, but not in the digital space, where Fei occasionally intervened to ensure the shared contents centered on urban citizenship. Although speculations about motivations behind state censorship and intimidation thrived in the digital private space, court impartiality was only alluded to on interfaces with the public sphere, such as the Official Account. This speaks to the varying degree of freedom across these spaces. Under Fei’s leadership, and with her colleagues’ assistance, activists deftly operated this matrix of free spaces to maximize opportunities for building solidarity, creating a mutually reinforcing narrative on active citizenship across different social sites.

While the digital space facilitates instantaneous advocacy suggestions, mutual encouragement, and collective outrage, activities in the organizational space, due to its intimacy and trust-building practices, accomplish the same but with greater depth—and sometimes they even deviate into slightly controversial territory. The downside is that not many members were able to join the monthly meetings due to personal commitments. The differing logics shape the pedagogy of active citizenship as well: In the organizational space, the pedagogy of active citizenship is disseminated through deeper reflective discussions that are interspersed with poignant retelling of anecdotes; but in the digital space, it is disseminated through call-and-response interactivity and participation among a wider range of participants.

Across the matrix of free spaces, participants’ collective consciousness and identity as rights-bearing citizens is “*talked* into existence” (Hunt & Benford, 2004, p. 445, emphasis in original). Indeed, a key device to disseminate pedagogies of active citizenship is narrative that speaks to “the shared experience of a larger group” (Polletta, 1998, p. 425) and creates an oppositional environment that emboldens people to action (Couto, 1993; Olsen, 2014). GV used narratives to establish a sense of purpose that bridged activists and self-joining individuals and to convince people of the worthiness and utility of testing the legal arena. Faced with the unfamiliar notion of pedestrians’ rights, and since Chinese citizens typically recoil at the costly and uncommon route of legal redress (Michelson, 2008), GV’s narratives render such a double bind of tactical innovation and issue novelty more palatable by containing “the disruptive within a familiar form, [and turning] the anomalous into the ‘new’” (Polletta, 1998, p. 422).

Beyond customizing the vocabulary of an idea to an audience, narratives have a didactic element that counsels listeners about tactical options and the optimal mind-set for activism while justifying the existence of the movement itself. Put simply, narratives seek to convince people about not only the ideas themselves but also how to act. For example, one of GV's lawsuits targeted the traffic police for entrapping motorists who parked illegally at an undesignated walkway. After the lawsuit reached the appeal stage, road poles blocking vehicle parking were erected, terminating the suspected practice of entrapment. When this occurred, even though the lawsuit was eventually lost, Fei exclaimed, "The effect is here" (WeChat conversation, October 3, 2015). Whether this was coincidence was immaterial. Such narrative portraying the group's legal action—and, by extension, its social agency—to be instrumental in eliciting positive state response motivated rather than demobilized activists. Fei retold this narrative through traditional platforms of a self-published handbook and activist conferences. As an individual who experienced and was disillusioned with the legal process, she can now speak with the authority of "little experts" and provide practical guidance and narratives about how ordinary people can still efficaciously work the dysfunctional legal system (Gallagher, 2006). This process provokes conversations among the skeptical, proselytizes the hesitant, and reaffirms the committed.

Conclusion

Attending to the notion of a matrix of free spaces and assessing the discursive agency backstage supply clues on what contributes to the remarkable vitality of China's environmental NGOs. Free spaces are integral resources for everyday organizing and for the circulation of pedagogy on active citizenship that contributes to producing a successor generation of activists. And digital spaces enabled by communication technologies are only part of an assemblage of free spaces available to these activists.

In an authoritarian context where barriers to activism are nearly insurmountable—and, hence, reliable and sustained activist leadership is a rarity—free spaces are especially vital. Authority figures from the activist realm serve as a stable core grounding old and emerging strategies in these institutionally sanctioned spaces. As Vala and O'Brien (2007) remark, free spaces "do not have to be very free"; they simply need to be "safe enough" (p. 88).

Although this single case study of the Green Volunteers is not representative of all ENGOS, it does highlight how Chinese activists need to first carve out a matrix of free spaces to talk about remaking urban spaces before mobilizing as citizens. This accords with Johnston's (2005) idea that "much of the *doing* of contentious politics is *talking* about it" (p. 108, emphasis in original). The discursive strategies in free spaces have sought to instigate shifts in subjectivity that challenge widespread powerlessness among individuals. They flip the conventional script about lawful activism, transcending a zero-sum game of winning or losing. Instead, the individual agency of citizenship, whether by going to court or donating behind one's desk, agglomerates into a force potent enough to press government officials to enact policy change. Even though activists recognized the prevailing limitations, they focused their attention on minor advances, contextualizing and occasionally exaggerating them, turning their action into an alternative and viable model of resistance. In (re)presenting Fei's apparent individual action as an exercise of active citizenship, activists endeavored to deepen the meaning and implications of citizenship, marking a small step toward raising rights awareness and precipitating cultural change. In other words, they use free spaces to transform

participants from “private actors . . . to public agents, able to understand themselves in terms of their impact on the larger world” (Evans & Boyte, 1992, p. xiii).

As China’s terrain for protest organizing grows more hostile, civil society organizations, owing to their institutional location and issue legitimacy, continue to play an indispensable role in nurturing the hidden transcripts of state-society interactions within their organizational spaces. This article illustrates the microfoundation of how civil society organizations may use multifaceted hybrid (free) spaces to mold contentious politics (Liu, 2017; Marolt & Herold, 2015). Rather than letting the counterdiscourse go viral and rapidly envelope the public scene like “wildfire” (DeLuca et al., 2016), the counterdiscourse in the digital spaces described here is carefully managed and “choreographed” by NGOs (Gerbaudo, 2012), such that even if it is deliberately understated and “drip-like” to ensure organizational survival, it retains the edge of contentiousness in its vision of “society *against* the state” (Yew, 2018, p.233, emphasis added).

To that end, the organizational logic driving digitally mediated mobilization approximates neither the leaderless horizontal networking model (Huang & Sun, 2014; Juris, 2012) nor the “liquid organizing” model under a “soft leadership” (Gerbaudo, 2012). “Hard” leadership, combined with a stable “mobilizing structure” (Tarrow, 1998), characterizes GV’s lawful activism. Fei led the charge by example to confront the powerful, even though it was her first time stepping into the courtroom. With input from colleagues, she actively directed the framing of their grievances, organized the volunteers, and recruited lawyers and journalists to their fold (Li & O’Brien, 2008). Her actions point to opportunities for future research on another underexplored area of the intersection of activist leadership and online mobilization. But protest leaders are usually prime targets of China’s state repression, again hinting at the indispensability of free spaces.

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