

Wenming Bu Wenming: The Socialization of Incivility in Postdigital China

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This article reviews theorizations of civil and uncivil society and highlights their underpinning in the ideal of civility, then introduces the Chinese concept of *wenming* [civilization] and outlines a history of what is considered *bu wenming* [uncivil] on Chinese online platforms. It then juxtaposes these definitions to a series of ethnographically grounded snapshots of media events and user interactions revolving around uncivil media practices. Drawing on firsthand accounts of the harassment of a foreign social media celebrity, a “Sticker War” between nationalist publics, a group chat about patriotism, and a BBS discussion of online incivility, the author argues for a shift from the prescriptive definitions of online civility and incivility to the situated understanding of how forms of uncivil sociality are articulated by digital media users in relation to various everyday practices, behaviors, and events.

Keywords: China, digital media, incivility, media practices, wenming

The global village absolutely insures maximal disagreement on all points. It never occurred to me that uniformity and tranquility were the properties of the global village . . . The tribal-global village is far more divisive—full of fighting—than any nationalism was. Village is fission, not fusion, in depth. (Marshall McLuhan, in Stearn, 1969, p. 272)

What is *wenming* [civil, civility] and *bu wenming* [uncivil, incivility] on Chinese social media platforms? The goal of this article is to illustrate how the idea of incivility is articulated by digital media users in relation to everyday practices, behaviors, and events, and socially constructed by different actors and publics for different purposes. Considering the long-trumpeted potential of digital media platforms to act as catalysts for the development of a local civil society, as well as the increasingly global visibility of uncivil behavior online, I argue that the case of China offers a peculiar yet underdiscussed example of how civility and incivility are socialized. Rather than positing a neat correlation between the ideal of civility and the concept of civil society, or a clear opposition between a Chinese civil society and its uncivil counterpart, I adopt a bottom-up ethnographic approach to the socialization of incivility in postdigital China. My use of the term “postdigital” indicates a moment in time in which a large portion of Internet users have moved past the enthusiastic early adoption of networked communications and the rhetoric of digital revolution

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(Cramer, 2014). In postdigital China, digital media have become an integral part of everyday life for a majority of the population (de Seta, 2015), and their embedment in social contexts of all sorts imply, among many other changes, shifts in the mediated negotiations of civility and incivility.

After a first introductory snapshot recounting the online harassment of a foreign social media celebrity, I review existing theorizations of uncivil society and mediated incivility, while also introducing the role of the idea of *wenming* in contemporary China. This is followed by a short history of *bu wenming* on Chinese digital media that charts uncivil practices from the early years of networked communications in the country to the recent developments of national Internet governance. Three more ethnographic snapshots, including cross-platform "Sticker Wars," small-scale group chats, and anonymous BBS discussions, further illustrate the shifting role of incivility in social interactions on digital media platforms. In the conclusion, I suggest a move away from prescriptive attempts at defining incivility on digital media toward situated understandings of how forms of uncivil sociality are performed and negotiated through everyday media practices. My qualitative account of how users foreground, protest, negotiate, and justify uncivil media practices proves that incivility is socially constructed through networked communications; by drawing on the situated local context of digital media in the People's Republic of China, it provides a fresh angle to a topic that is often discussed and defined through Euro-American examples and case studies.

The arguments presented in this essay are grounded on a long-term, first-person engagement with multiple Chinese social media platforms, as well as on ethnographic research conducted for my doctoral degree. The snapshots included in this article resulted from the author's observation of, and participation in, widely commented media events and incidents unfolding between mid-2015 and mid-2016, as well as interviews with users of several platforms and focus group-like discussions organized with members of different online forums and chat groups. Following a local foregrounding of incivility on official media and propaganda websites (Huang, 2015), I have chosen these events and incidents among the many flaring up daily on Chinese social media platforms according to the prominence and popularity as discussion topics they achieved in the existing networks I was embedded in as a researcher (various QQ groups, my Sina Weibo microblog feed, my WeChat timeline, Facebook friends' posts and profile pages, and an image-based discussion board). These popularly commented media events and incidents share a common background of hot-button issues such as foreign politics, patriotism and nationalism, and often happened to become the focus of broader discussions about incivility online.

While quantitative approaches might provide a wider and more complete picture of the topics, platforms, and userbases involved in uncivil behaviors on digital media, approaching these discussions qualitatively makes possible more nuanced and in-depth insights into the everyday media practices behind the socialization of incivility itself. My reliance on an ethnographic approach to digital media use is grounded on the insight, neatly formulated in Alireza Doostdar's study of vulgarity in Iranian blogging, that qualitative methodologies are the most suitable to trace the complex social formations emerging around linguistic practices, contested identities, and techno-national imaginations (2004, p. 653). Just as it is necessary to understand the social construction of the concept of *ebtezaal* [vulgarity] through the debates of Iranian bloggers, delving into the everyday discussions of Chinese digital media users might be the best way to get a sense of what, when, and where is considered *bu wenming*.

Exhibit A: *Ziganwu*¹

I am interviewing Christoph Rehage on Skype². Author of a successful memoir recounting his travels on foot across China (Rehage, 2012) and writer of social commentaries featured on Chinese popular media, he has become an online celebrity of sorts across multiple Chinese online platforms. Christoph is currently living in Germany, and he came under my attention for his history of being harassed by Chinese Internet users for his outspoken sociopolitical commentary, an experience that culminated in legal threats by members of the Communist Youth League (Latt, 2016). "It all started after I published that video on my YouTube channel. It was a response to some events happening around Mao's birthday recurrence on December 26," Christoph tells me,³ referring to a recent Chinese-language video clip in which he compared Mao Zedong to Adolf Hitler.

Christoph Rehage is not new to online contention. His activity on Chinese social media platforms started rather casually when someone uploaded one of his most popular YouTube videos to a local streaming website. Despite not having much interest in engaging with Chinese social media, in 2011 he registered an account on Sina Weibo to promote the Chinese translation of his book, and soon realized that he had landed in what he defines "the high time of the Chinese Internet," when microblogging platforms were hosting vibrant discussions and heated debates. Being one of the few foreigners straightforwardly discussing current affairs on Sina Weibo, he quickly rose to popularity on the website; yet, along with his verified microblogging account, endorsement deals with different platforms, and a painstakingly earned 100,000 followers, soon came harassment:

I would get attacked once in a while, but they were small attacks, minor battles. They would come in waves from forums like Tianya [Ends of the Earth], Qianguo Luntan [Strong Nation Forum] or Siyuewang [April Network] where some of my posts had been linked to. They acted in little groups, not so much like *wumao* ["fifty-cent" paid posters], but the result was similar: a constant stream of "fuck you" thrown at you by thousands of people. Sometimes Sina would take my posts down if they got out of hand.

In the beginning, Christoph reacted to the attacks in a good spirit, at some point even starting to call himself *ziganwu*—literally "voluntary 50-cent poster"—adopting a vernacular neologism used by the very same users who were attacking him. Then, when he started engaging prominent Maoist personalities on politically sensitive issues such as North Korea or the Cultural Revolution, attacks became more vicious

¹ The Mandarin neologism *ziganwu*, literally meaning "voluntary 50-cent poster," rose to popularity in 2015 as a self-mocking identifier through which patriotic and leftist social media users could signal their own voluntarist participation in defending China and the CCP from rumors, slander, and liberal critiques.

² In keeping with a flexible approach to qualitative Internet research ethics (Markham & Buchanan, 2012), I anonymized or masked the identities of directly quoted digital media users through pseudonyms except when explicitly asked not to, while their textual and visual productions are referenced with the most possibly accurate degree of authorial attribution (Bruckman, 2002).

³ All direct quotes come from a 3-hour Skype interview conducted by the author on January 25, 2016 and subsequent online interactions.

and orchestrated, until he made the fatal mistake of cracking a racy joke about Chinese cultural icons Lei Feng and Hua Mulan:

In July 2015 I made a bad joke about Lei Feng and Hua Mulan having a baby—I recognize that I phrased it very badly and that the humor kind of got lost in translation—and they all jumped on me. This time it was not just *wumao* or *ziganwu*, it was Maoists from BBSs like Gongjitian and Qingnianwang, and they had everyone on their side. They started to call me “Turkish pig,” “foreign trash,” and insinuated that I was part of a conspiracy. I received offenses through Weibo comments, private messages and email ranging from “Go back to your mom’s cunt, China doesn’t need bastard dogs like you!” to “The day I meet you, I’m going to slaughter you with a knife.” Someone even harassed me by calling on my German mobile phone, which was quite creepy because it was a private number that very few people had. This time Sina had to close my account immediately, probably after orders from above.

In the wake of these attacks, and the resulting lockdown of his Sina Weibo account, Christoph abandoned Chinese social media and moved his online presence back to YouTube, where he could keep uploading videos for his most devoted followers without worrying about the regulations and bottom lines of Sina Weibo or other Chinese digital media platforms. The video in which he compared Mao to Hitler (Deguo Ziganwu, 2015), which resulted in threatening editorials by the Communist Youth League (G. Lu, 2016), was just the latest episode in a long history of online contention (Tatlow, 2016). “I still think that in China there is a vibrant critical spirit and a great potential for civil society,” Christoph tells me,

but certain discussions unavoidably end up in extremism: *ziyoupai* [liberal], Maoist, *wumao*, *ziganwu*, *gongzhi* [public intellectual], *meifendang* [pro-U.S. paid poster]. . . all these terms become offenses, and even liberal intellectuals attack each other with heavy insults, something that in a civil society would disqualify you from any public discussion. The media doesn’t control it, the government doesn’t control it, and so incivility just runs free. . .

Christoph Rehage’s experiences of being repeatedly harassed and attacked on a Chinese social media platform provide a partial introduction to the intricacies of political identities, sensitive topics and national imaginations that characterize networked communications in the country. Moreover, his rise and fall as a Weibo celebrity—at first treasured by Sina as a profitable content creator, and eventually banned for becoming the focus of too much contention—hints at dynamics more complicated than the straightforward authoritarian model often invoked when discussing Chinese online media. At the same time, Christoph’s conclusion regarding how Chinese digital media platforms and authorities both seem to willfully allow selected kinds of incivility to run rampant, encouraging polarized forms of offense and contention that hinder the development of a functioning and healthy civil society in the country, also appears to be grounded on an idealized Euro-American understanding of civil debate, and its tenability begs for a more situated examination of the correlation between civility and civil society in postdigital China.

(Un)civil Society, Mediated (In)civility

The connection between the ideas of civility and civil society goes beyond their shared etymology. From Ferdinand Tönnies' classical definition of civil society as a "society based on general commercial exchange" (2001, pp. 63–64), the term has become "one of the most enduring and confusing concepts in social science" (Edwards, 2011, p. 3), most commonly understood 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" (2011, p. 4). A healthy civil society has been often touted as a universal remedy for problems afflicting developing countries, becoming "a sort of 'aspirational shorthand' for ideas and values of equity, increasing participation, public fairness, individual rights, tolerance, trust, legality, cooperation and informed citizenry" (Gudavarthy & Vijay, 2007, p. 3051). In this sense, the ideal of civility functions as both the guiding principle and the goal of developing a civil society.

Confronted with the blurred boundaries of the concept of civil society, with the mixed successes of the aspirational propositions accompanying it, as well as with a troublesome global resurgence of contentious politics not fitting its democratic and deliberative orientation, various authors have proposed the term "uncivil society" to subsume "a wide range of disruptive, unwelcome and threatening elements deemed to have emerged in the spaces between the individual and the state" (Rumford, 2001, para. 5). Uncivil society, the dark side of civil society including "those forces within civil society that are generally considered to be negative, i.e. non- or even anti-democratic" (Kopecký & Mudde, 2003, p. xv), is used as a catch-all label to describe the emergence of phenomena as variegated as informal urban practices in the Middle East (Bayat, 1997), ultranationalist groups in Russia (Umland, 2008), self-protection militias and fundamentalist extremism in Indonesia (Beitinger-Lee, 2009), and exclusionist and populist parties in Europe (Ruzza, 2009). Given its widespread adoption to indicate "manifestations of civil society that challenge liberal democratic values" (Glasius, 2010, p. 1584), the concept of uncivil society has been strongly criticized for its judgmental normativity and ideological charge (Bob, 2011), and as recent social constructivist accounts emphasize, both civility and incivility are situated and negotiable, each closer to being "a mode of interaction and perception" than an attribute of specific terms or practices (Jamieson et al., 2017, p. 206).

The advent of ICTs and the popularization of networked media over the past decades have increasingly brought debates around civil and uncivil society to the fore (Lentz, 2011). As early as 1996, Thomas W. Benson discusses the role of Usenet in relation to the development of civility, community, and democracy, contrasting these ideals with actual online discussions routinely characterized by "aggressiveness, certainty, angry assertion, insult, ideological abstraction, and the attempt to humiliate opponents" (1996, p. 359). The ideal of civility plays a central role in recent post-Habermasian speculations about the Internet's potential to become a public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002), as well as in more radical critiques of the idea (Dean, 2003, p. 98). Along with the development of different forms of networked communication and online interaction, theorizations have been refined to recognize and take stock of different nuances of contention: impoliteness in political discussion groups (Papacharissi, 2004), outrage in news media (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011), incivility in online newspaper comment sections (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014), and so forth.

How do civility and incivility factor into the peculiar sociotechnical situation of contemporary China? The concept of civil society has been recurrently invoked when discussing the modernization of the country (Howell, 2011), but also extensively criticized for its inadequacy in capturing the political complexity of the relationship between the public sphere and the party-state (H. Wang, 1998) and for its orientalist underpinnings (Vukovich, 2009). In academic analyses and mass media coverage, the ideal of civility has been largely constructed around two major discourses: one pitching a burgeoning civil society pushing back against an uncivil state, and another describing an uncivil populace in need of a civilizing state, both of which routinely obscure more conciliatory forms of discussion and deliberation that Chinese authorities allow or even encourage. The first discourse, predominantly embraced by liberal analysts and pro-democracy activists, connects emerging communication technologies to the unavoidable burgeoning of a civic conscience and progressive social movements among Chinese Internet users (Tang, 2009). Different forms of networked communication are identified as transformative and empowering for civil society (Zheng & Wu, 2005), while governmental control and authoritarian reactions—from increasingly refined censorship mechanisms to the employment of paid posters—are denounced as forms of uncivil oppression. In this discursive context, China is often depicted as an uncivil society created by the absence of grass-roots representation (D. Han, 2005), resulting in a country “full of antagonisms and barely controlled instabilities that continually threaten to explode” (Žižek, 2015, para. 6).



Figure 1. "Speak wenming words, do wenming things, be a wenming person, build a wenming town." Slogans promoting wenming [civility] on the walls of a high school in the Shanghai countryside. Photo by the author, June 2016.

The second discourse, on the contrary, identifies the lack of civility among the Chinese population as a major cause of the social problems riddling the country, and prescribes the enlightened guidance of the civilizing state as a remedy for the citizenry's low *suzhi* [quality] (Anagnost, 2004). This discourse is widely embraced by Chinese authorities and mobilized to support controls and restrictions on national media systems. The origins of this local understanding of civility are to be found in the arrival of the concept of civil society in China (S. Wang, 1991), one translation of which—*wenming shehui*, literally "civilized society"—has been in turn adopted by the party-state to indicate the civilizing role of its governance (Ma, 1994, p. 192). Once transposed into a party-approved propaganda term, *wenming* has become an ideological keyword attached to multiple aspects of social life, from urban development and interpersonal relationships to commercial practices and Internet use (Figure 1).

While these two dominant discourses categorize civil and uncivil society in the Chinese context through diametrically contraposed understandings of the concepts of civility and incivility, the framework proposed by Jamieson et al. (2017), in which both concepts are socially constructed modes of interaction and perception, complicates this typology by foregrounding multiple layers of their articulation in everyday life. The account of *bu wenming*—'incivility,' 'the uncivil'—proposed in the rest of this essay focuses on the phenomena identified and labeled by digital media users as uncivil, and on the behaviors stigmatized and discouraged by the authorities in the name of civility. By highlighting the multiple ways in which discourses of *wenming* and accusations of *bu wenming* are articulated by users of different digital media platforms, I complicate the opposition of civility and incivility and contribute a more situated understanding of uncivil sociality to the ongoing debates around the issue.

Bu Wenming: A Short History of Online Incivility

Incivility has been a constant component of the so-called 'Chinese Internet' since its early days. Even when less than 0.5% of the Chinese population had access to an Internet connection (Du, 1999, p. 417), and most of the online activity consisted of browsing simple HTML pages or interacting on university bulletin boards, topics such as democracy and national integrity generated heated debates despite netiquette rules against impolite and aggressive behavior (Huang, 1999, p. 152). The following BBS post from 1996 might be one of the earliest recorded cases of flaming on the Chinese Internet:

Posted by Kuo Ming (2016) on 11/05/96

Wang Dang [sic] must die! China doesn't need democracy [sic], neither does Hong Kong! Democracy is bullshit! Chinese do not need democracy. We Chinese need "the socialism with Chinese characteristics." HKnese will also enjoy the socialism with Chinese characteristics after year 1997. Who the hell wants the democracy? (Huang, 1999, p. 153)

As the user population started to grow exponentially throughout the 2000s, the influx of younger generations made increasingly massive BBSs more visible, and their online activities became the source for veritable moral panics around phenomena like *renrou sousuo* [online vigilantism] and the exploits of *fenqing* [angry youth] (Lagerkvist, 2008, p. 139). While nationalist youths were directing their efforts at defending China's reputation against the perceived biases of Western media, different groups of users

were engaging in media wars over popular culture fandom, such as the famed “69 Holy War,” which was conducted across popular BBSs and news portals and involved over 100,000 fans of the Korean pop band Super Junior and their critics hurling insults at each other (L. Yang & Zheng, 2012, p. 645). Even if the existence of uncivil practices of contention is most often related to the development of online activism across Chinese digital media platforms (G. Yang, 2009) and to “mass Internet incidents” pressuring the Chinese state (Esarey & Xiao, 2011, p. 300), observers increasingly recognize how many cases of incivility actually involve conservative and reactionary publics. As Leibold highlights, the countless topical discussion boards hosted on platforms like Baidu Tieba, Mop, and Tianya have quickly become breeding grounds for “flaming, trolling, hacking and the sort of trash-talk and uncivil behavior—what the Chinese have termed ‘Internet verbal violence’ (*wangluo yuyan baoli*)—that one would never contemplate in face-to-face communication” (2011, p. 1034).

The pervasive presence of incivility online pushes scholars to recognize how the Chinese Internet appears as a “rising cacophony” (Hu, 2008), resulting from a “highly complex public space inhabited by myriad individuals and groups” (Marolt, 2011, p. 60). The essays collected in a 2011 issue of *Chinese Education and Society* edited by Stanley Rosen portray a Chinese youth characterized by contradictory political imaginations and belongings, often directly reflected by their activities on digital media (Rosen, 2011, p. 4). The essays describe younger generations in terms of conflictual tensions among cohorts born in different decades (W. Zhang, 2011), widespread xenophobic militarism (H. Wu, 2011), and the contradictory coexistence of extreme nationalism and national nihilism (Liu, 2011). Online forums and social networking websites are not only the battlegrounds of labeling skirmishes between liberal and New Left intellectuals accusing each other of being *wumao* or *dailudang* [foreign collaborators] (Tong & Lei, 2013, p. 300), but also arenas of contention for all sorts of *pipanxing sikao* [critical thinking] where the labels thrown around include offenses such as *naocan* [brain damaged] and *xiniao* [brainwashed] (A. X. Wu, 2012, p. 2229). Factional clashes are often polarized around claims by online celebrities and public intellectuals, and occasionally spiral down into personal harassment or even street brawls (Ruan, 2015). It is not surprising that, in this environment, governmental attempts to foster dialogue and to moderate incivility through official microblogging accounts have largely failed to engage “China’s rambunctious and even ‘uncivil’ Internet users” (Esarey, 2015, p. 69).

In light of this history of contention, the efforts of Chinese authorities at promoting *wenming shangwang* [going online with civility] seem to make a certain sense. The government’s position, as outlined by the Director of the State Internet Information Office (SIIO), Lu Wei, affirms that “in order to create a healthy and harmonious Internet environment, all countries should cultivate a civilized Internet, and guide their people to use the Internet in a civilized way” (2013, para. 7). At the same time, a recent opinion piece widely republished across party mouthpieces and state media outlines what it means to be a *hao wangmin* [good Internet user], enlisting users in patriotic defense of the nation against denigration by foreign media:

Being a *hao wangmin*, it is not only to dare being part of the fifty-cent party, or joining the *dianzandang* [click-like party]; one also needs to happily become a *ziganwu*, to come together with others and voice the positive side of the Internet in order to disseminate the mighty power of mainstream values. (An, 2014, para. 3)

In state propaganda, online incivility becomes a token issue: On the one hand, it is decried as an unhealthy result of non-harmonious media use; on the other, certain uncivil practices are encouraged for patriotic purposes such as maintaining “cultural security” and limiting the penetration of “Western values” in the country (Cao, 2015).

Exhibit B: Sticker Wars

During the writing of this article, the one incident that captured the attention of most of my online contacts—conflating national and local belongings, uncivil practices and political identities—was the “Sticker War” brought by thousands of Mainland Chinese BBS users to the Facebook page of neo-elected Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen in the wake of the country’s 2016 general elections. Although quite similar to previous “forum wars” among online communities, the “invasion” of Tsai Ing-wen’s profile page was updated to the contemporary context of social media platforms, and predominantly interpreted by national and international media as being a case of large-scale Chinese trolling with strong patriotic overtones (Sonnad, 2016). This cross-strait spam campaign was carefully organized by users of Di Ba, a massive discussion board hosted on the Baidu Tieba platform and famed for its long history of humorous creations and contentious activities (de Seta, 2013), as a social action aimed at ridiculing the result of Taiwanese elections while also projecting an aggressively patriotic collective voice. Thousands of Di Ba users—more than 30,000 according to an ecstatic Global Times article—used VPN software to access Facebook from China, and systematically flooded Tsai Ing-wen’s official profile and other Taiwanese Facebook pages with images and copy-pasted texts (Y. Zhang, 2016), a form of tactical spamming clearly meant to assert spatial sovereignty and temporarily monopolize political commentary around the event.

The *biaoqing* [“expressions,” a Chinese term including all kinds of emoticons, stickers, animated GIFs, and reaction images] that gave this campaign its curious name were collected into easily downloadable *biaoqingbao* [emoticon packs] widely shared over local social media platforms (Figure 2). These hundreds of purposefully designed *biaoqing* consisted of photos of celebrities and political figures, screenshots from movies, TV series and cartoons, drawings, and national symbols, many of them captioned with Mandarin punchlines ranging from humorous provocation, through vulgar offenses, to territorial threats: “Given your poor IQ, it’s really hard to exchange opinions,” “I told you a hundred times already, traditional characters were also invented by your Mainland daddy,” “Every one of you! Is an idiot! You all are!,” “*Shabi* [stupid cunts],” “Taiwan is part of China, China can’t be one territory less!,” “What the fuck, you dare to support Taiwan independence?.”

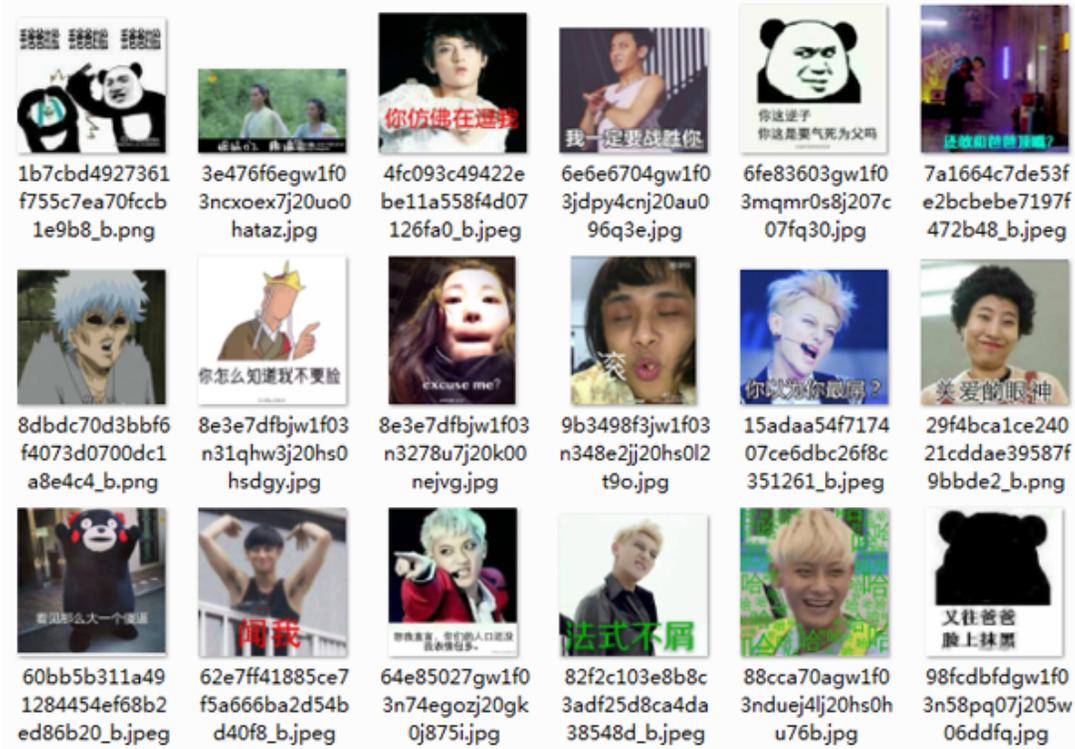


Figure 2. Some of the emoticons and captioned images included in the biaoqingbao [emoticon pack] widely shared during the Di Ba Sticker War on Taiwanese Facebook pages. Authors unknown, 2016.

Besides *biaoqing*, Sticker War participants also spammed copy-pasted text messages including the *Ba Rong Ba Chi* [Eight Honors and Eight Shames] slogans formulated by Hu Jintao, along with several other patriotic compositions and mocking insults. Their aim, according to an alleged anonymous organizer, was “to tell Taiwanese independentists that there is one China, and that it will not be split apart because of a few of them making a fuss” (Dan & Qiu, 2016). Although leaked instructions given to Sticker War participants seemed to imply a degree of propaganda guidance beyond the event, subsequent reactions from news media on both ends of the political spectrum claimed to be surprised by this outburst of patriotic activism (mtj828, 2016), and eventually resorted to downplaying the incident in order to limit its impact on Cross-Strait relations (Henochowicz, 2016). While some Chinese participants in the Sticker War reminded each other of the importance of remaining “civilized” throughout the event, Taiwanese media and Facebook users experienced it as an uncivil “attack” exemplifying the mob rule mentality of Chinese Internet users. None of my social media contacts participated first-hand in either side of the Sticker War, yet the event and its interpretation were hotly contested discussion topics for weeks, and the images contained in the *biaoqingbao* quickly became a resource for waging smaller-scale “wars” among chat

groups, or simply to make fun of the whole episode. As a large-scale media event revolving around contested national belongings and geopolitical claims, the Sticker War exemplifies how civility and incivility can be mobilized and interpreted according to radically contrasting situated understandings.

Exhibit C: Uncivil Media Everyday

The prominence given by national and international news media to spectacular media incidents involving online celebrities and politically polarized social actions obfuscates the small-scale, everyday user perceptions of mediated incivility. A few months before the Sticker War, I happened to follow a discussion happening inside Lightwave, a group chatroom hosted on Tencent QQ, one of the instant messaging applications most popular in China. I have been a member of Lightwave for more than 4 years, and I've seen the group grow (around a shared interest in electronic music) to its current size of more than 100 members of various ages, genders, and backgrounds. I have met only a couple of Lightwave members outside of social media platforms, but I enjoy taking part in the group's bubbling and unpredictable conversations. On this specific day, one specific discussion about the incivility of patriotism evolves from high school memories:

A: 2001, the last year of high school... that year people around me, including me, were all *aiguo qingnian* [patriotic youth, intentionally written as "patriotic-cancer youth" through a homophonic character]

B: Yeah I know

C: 😁

D: I never walked down the road of patriotic-cancerism even if I got more than 90 points on Politics in my high school finals

A: You're a good *qingnian* [youth]

Patriotic-cancer is quite scary

D: As long as you do your own thing and live your own life, that's good enough why would you care about it?

C: Well, for certain people today you are allowed to say that the *gong* [Communist Party] is not good, but you are not allowed to say that the *Tianchao* [Heavenly Kingdom, ironic nickname for China] isn't good, because America and Japan want to destroy the *Tianchao*, and so. . .

D: That's true, logical thinking has been already completely extinguished in this country, so these ways of thinking automatically create contradictions and confusion

E: I think I never had patriotic-cancer either

A: It's not that the Communist Party is bad. . . I feel that it's the people behind it who have problems orders come from the government, but then they are distorted

C: The nationalist and hateful education that is being promoted today, I think it's the soil being tilled for a big dictatorship

D: Actually I always wanted to be a dictator

E: When you're young it's quite easy to be influenced by weird thoughts it's always because of this concept of global village. . .

While noncommittal and fragmented as much of multithreaded interpersonal communication happening in instant messaging groups, this specific conversation presents a more nuanced picture of Chinese Internet users navigating contemporary political landscapes through their own everyday experiences of uncivil behavior, their perplexities about the party-state, and their perceptions of the “weird thoughts” of patriotic propaganda and hateful nationalism circulating throughout the “global village” of the Internet. Couched in creative vernacular terms distorting key terms for humorous effect (“patriotism” becoming “patriotic-cancer,” *Tianchao* standing for China, *gong* for Communist Party), this dialogue among a few group members quickly moves into more politically involved commentary:

D: The government of the CCP is an autocracy and a dictatorship, the system works from top to bottom, while in Western societies it is from bottom to top but many people are willing to keep going like this

C: If they want to keep going like this, who cares, there’s still a lot of people that think the Party came to power to liberate them

D: That’s because they went through Mao Zedong and his age of *xiniao* [brainwashing]

A: The way Xi Jinping is going is basically Mao Zedong 2.0 version

D: Mao Zedong evolution

F: I feel that Xi is an imitator of Mao

A: After Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping came to power, and the first thing was getting rid of Bo Xilai, the second was the so-called “anti-corruption,” and the third is now to protect the Communist Party’s *yishi xingtai* [ideology] by going against Western liberal values

D: Fighting corruption is good though

A: Just how Xi has said

the *Qi Bu Jiang* [Seven Don’t-Talk-About]:

Don’t talk about universal rights

Don’t talk about the freedom of the media

Don’t talk about civil society

Don’t talk about civil rights

Don’t talk about the history of Party mistakes

Don’t talk about the bourgeois elite

Don’t talk about judiciary independence

C: Wasn’t even Jiang Zemin better than this?

Today I saw on Weibo that a guy I follow has been invited to drink tea with the *xionghao* [“pandas.” national security officers] because of something he posted online, and now he’s confined at home

D: That’s how it goes

From political analyses about China’s current predicaments, the mass media demonization of America and Japan, and a generalized pessimism about the demise of critical thought, the Lightwave group discussion shifts toward the Maoist era and its reliance on brainwashing, and then directly jumps to current President Xi Jinping’s push against liberal values. Through copy-pasting the *Qi Bu Xiang*, a set of slogans attributed to Xi Jinping (but originally posted on Weibo by law professor Zhang Xuezhong and successively censored by the same platform), one group member brings the concepts of civil society and

civil rights into the discussion under a different guise: a list of sensitive topics not to be openly discussed in times of ideological surveillance. This freewheeling discussion, spurred by high school memories of political education and disquieting patriotic classmates, links hateful nationalism to the strengthening of authoritarianism and the ubiquity of corruption, ending with resigned commentaries on the enforcement of civility through intimidation.

To be sure, Lightwave is only one QQ chatroom among millions of private discussion groups hosted by different Chinese online platforms, and the demographic of its members, although quite variegated, does predominantly consist of liberal-minded youth and young adults interested in a cosmopolitan form of cultural consumption. In private discussions and small talk outside of the chat group, friends and acquaintances expressed differing evaluations of online incivility: A young publishing editor enjoyed engaging in enflamed political discussions across left-wing Douban groups, while her partner found the activity irritating: “they are very leftist, or rightists for you [in the West]. . . how to put it. . . very oppositional, they like to oppose Marxism, to badmouth the Communist Party. We fight a lot because of this.” A third friend commented that, while too fervent, it was entertaining to follow those political discussion groups if only to *weiguan* [observe without intervening] the personal attacks leading to online brawls and deleted accounts. While the Lightwave QQ group exemplifies the segment of Chinese social media users who choose to decry uncivil politics with a mixture of humorous indifference and reflexive resignation (Nordin & Richaud, 2014), it should be noted how individuals fine-tune and negotiate their preferred modes of interaction with online contention on profoundly personal terms.

Exhibit D: What is *Bu Wenming*?

Many of the discussions about *bu wenming* I had with friends and acquaintances while doing research for this essay linked uncivil behaviors to specific online communities, social groupings, and political leanings. Recent commentaries hint at how a younger generation of Internet users might be cobbling together new forms of political belongings on less-known forum boards (mtj828, 2016), yet a decade after China’s “year of online communities” (Pang, 2008, p. 60) most analyses of Chinese discussion boards are still limited to well-known platforms like Qiangguo Luntan [Strong Nation Forum] (Tao, 2001; Zheng & Wu, 2005) or more extremist military BBSs (R. Han, 2015; Zhou, 2005). In order to obtain finer insights into the socialization of incivility among Chinese digital media users, during January 2016 I created a few discussion threads in an online forum that I used to browse regularly,⁴ and my simple question—“Which are the most prominent *bu wenming* incidents on the Chinese Internet?”—gathered hundreds of replies in just a few hours.

Many replies to my initial question resulted in a broad overview of what Z-Space users perceived as *bu wenming* online events and media practices. Some of the answers included “the Baidu Hemophilia forum incident,” “collecting negative information,” “*renrou sousuo* [online vigilantism],” “spreading

⁴ The forum, which I will call Z-Space, is a Futaba-based image board in the style of the Japanese 2chan or the American 4chan, and hosts a tight community of users structured around categories typical of ACG [animation, comics and videogames] fandom. The forum allows and encourages anonymous posting, and is carefully moderated according to largely observed community rules.

rumors," "*diyu hei* [regional discrimination]," "*baoba* [forum wars]," "jumping over the firewall to join the Sticker War against Taiwanese democracy," "scams on Zhihu," "the Chou Tzu-yu apology," "the 69 Holy War," "the Douyu scandal," and many other more or less well-known examples of uncivil practices. Along with the usual requests to prove my identity as a foreigner and the humorous warnings of impending deportation if I was found to be a human rights activist, other users commented that "online violence is pretty cool," and that one shouldn't be surprised by it because "there are a lot of professional criminals on the Chinese Internet." Someone half-jokingly replied that "the most *bu wenming* behavior is to *zhuang* [show off]," although another anonymous user agreed that:

The most prominent form of *bu wenming*? It definitely has to be when a group of people have not experienced and understood something first-hand—a videogame, an event, a technical skill—but they absolutely have to give their opinions. [...] These people, we call them "kings of eloquence" or "great spirits of the keyboard."

The comments of Z-Space users point toward uncivil practices and behaviors enacted by a wide range of actors: Some users acknowledged having taken part in forum wars or having openly engaged in regional discrimination and verbal abuse, but at the same time found the pretentious attitude of self-righteous community outsiders to also be a form of incivility. Some deemed Internet companies' fabricating scandals and selling information for profit (such as Baidu's selling the management rights of a forum popular among hemophiliac patients) to be a chief example of uncivil practices. Others ascribed incivility to scammers and criminals, such as the young man pretending to be a girl on the Q&A website Zhihu and extorting money from well-meaning users through fabricated stories. One user attributed *bu wenming* to the ubiquitous activities of commercial astroturfers:

I think that the *shuijun* ["water army" of paid posters] is really *bu wenming*. . . Every time it's like this: a few hundred thousand or less people vainly attempting to represent the will of China's 1.4 billion people.

When I interjected that most of what they described as *bu wenming* was being attributed to disruptive outsiders, commercial companies, or state authorities rather than regular users, several Z-Space members agreed on one point—incivility is everywhere:

Users being *bu wenming* happens all the time, you can't even keep track of it. People from every country are very similar in this regard: they debate and offend each other on the Internet because of their different political opinions, different privileges, different social strata, different location, and so on. . . it's very common.

Isn't online violence on display every day? Irritable fat nerds are always around!

If you are talking about *bu wenming* users, that's everywhere every day, but there isn't enough to make an incident out of it.

After roughly one full day of asynchronous debating around the topic, the discussion thread I started run out of steam. Some of the most politically charged posts were deleted by moderators—

especially the ones mentioning Taiwan or accusing me of being a foreign agent bringing turmoil to the forum board—and more recent threads captured the attention of Z-Space users. As many other discussions I had experienced on the platform, debating *bu wenming* was overall a noticeably civil activity: Users helped rein in off-topic discussions, moderators convinced unruly users to cooperate without having to close the entire thread, and different political and ideological positions were articulated without any of the contention and outrage that are often imagined to permeate interactions on Chinese social media platforms. For many forum members, there were two distinct kinds of incivility: a prominent, annoying assortment of uncivil practices attributed to large actors like social media platforms and commercial companies; and a generalized, mostly harmless mode of contentious behavior characterizing the everyday interactions of digital media users around the world.

Uncivil Sociality

In this article, I have juxtaposed discussions about uncivil society and mediated incivility on online platforms with four ethnographic snapshots drawn from a necessarily thin slice of everyday digital media use in contemporary China. The issue of *bu wenming* media practices is very timely, and the discourses around the concept of incivility highlight a constant process of negotiation: At the moment of writing this conclusion, the Sticker War on Taiwanese Facebook pages has faded into the history of digital folklore in the span of a few weeks, while local social media users turn their attention to news about Chinese authorities preparing to crack down on the online presence of foreign news media, to awkward hints of a rising Xi Jinping personality cult, and to the deletion of yet another prominent Weibo celebrity's microblogging account—this time not a small-fry foreign troublemaker like Christoph Rehage, but property developer and Communist Party member Ren Zhiqiang, with his social media following of 38 million accounts.

Almost 50 years after Marshall McLuhan's provocative correlation between the global tribalization of the media and the intensification of disagreement, the case of postdigital China presents an important case study for the theorization of civility in contemporary mediated societies: Is the tribal-global village truly more divisive and contentious than any nationalism, or do nationalist and patriotic affects intensify online incivility even more? Despite the almost automatic correlation between etymologically close terms, this article shows how complicating the understandings of civil and uncivil society through local articulations of concepts like civility and incivility uncovers the discursive constructions they undergo in different contexts, as well as their everyday negotiations by different publics. By presenting four ethnographic snapshots of user interactions revolving around uncivil media practices, I have disentangled the idea of incivility from recurring oppositions between a civil society and an uncivil state or between an uncivilized populace and a civilizing state. The multiplication of contested identities and labels involved in debates surrounding the concepts of *wenming* and *bu wenming* signals the existence of a sociopolitical landscape that is much more varied than commonly portrayed, a phenomenon that justifies recent calls for more situated understandings of how uncivil media practices are grounded on local experiences of usage and should not be reduced to state-sponsored categories of discourse (Pohjonen & Udupa, 2017).

Discussion board flaming, online vigilantism, angry youth, trolling, and forum wars; personal attacks, verbal violence, shame campaigns, impersonation, scams, rumormongering, and astroturfing;

ziganwu, *wumao*, neo-Maoists, liberals, public intellectuals, *shuijun*, brain-damaged and brainwashed, "patriotic-cancer" and emoticon packs: In postdigital China, the uncivil is constantly articulated, across multiple contexts, through the interpretation of practices and behaviors. In line with similar research about civil discourse on online platforms and ethnographic accounts of contentious digital media practices, uncivil interactions on Chinese social media appear much less pervasive than stereotypically assumed, and the concept of *bu wenming* is most often invoked by users in discussions of prominent media events as an occasion to take part in the social construction of identities and belongings, a dialogic practice that I propose to call "uncivil sociality."

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