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Winning Hearts and Minds? Cadres as Microbloggers in China

Ashley ESAREY

Abstract: China's local governments are facing a crisis of public confidence and have struggled to handle political dissent and popular protests. In an attempt to promote political stability, local officials around the country have utilized Twitter-like microblog sites (微博, *weibo*) to upgrade their capability to influence citizens and engage in rapid information management. Through the analysis of microblogging by prominent propagandists whose identities and professions are known to the public, this article finds some evidence that microblogging could be helping cadres to win hearts and minds, although such microblogging poses new risks to the state as netizens challenge propagandists and state policies in exchanges that reveal political pluralism and disapproval of state policies. While venting on *weibo* may enable people to blow off steam, the reluctance (or inability) of official microbloggers to engage their critics in meaningful dialogue suggests the limited utility of official microblogging as a means of furthering political stability through the improvement of state–society relations.

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Keywords: China, propaganda, political stability, *weibo*, dissent

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Introduction

Since the demise of Mao Zedong's radical policies, China's rulers have embarked upon a range of political reforms that have been identified by political scientists as "adaptive governance", "adaptive authoritarianism" or "authoritarian resilience" (Heilmann and Perry 2011; Chen 2010; Nathan 2003). Central to these conceptions is the notion that the Chinese regime has responded to a host of challenges and potential causes of regime instability by remaking political institutions to enable the party-state to govern more effectively and win greater popular support. Scholars of Chinese politics in the Reform Era (1978–present) have emphasized the linkage between economic reforms and political stability (Yang 2004; Tsai 2007). Studies have identified the ways in which the party-state has sought to improve state–society relations through such initiatives as the promotion of elections at the village level, the induction of business elites into the ranks of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and local legislatures (Dickson 2003; Chen and Dickson 2010) and the accommodation of limited forms of protest (Chen 2011). True to its Leninist origins, the Chinese party-state has undertaken a series of measures to maintain its ability to influence public opinion by providing market incentives for mass media to comply with censorship guidelines (Esarey 2005), creating an environment of restrictive uncertainty among investigative journalists (Hassid 2008), repackaging propaganda for more discriminating audiences (Brady 2008; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011) and covertly promoting "politically correct" commentary online (Hung 2010; Han 2013). The embrace of *zhengwu weibo* (政务微博) – microblogging by officials and state institutions – represents another major innovation to promote political stability through state participation in internet forums, where the regime's agenda-setting capacity has diminished relative to mass media (Esarey and Xiao 2011: 312).

Can official microblogging contribute to political stability where other reform measures have failed? Or, is it possible that extending the reach of the party-state into online spaces that are relatively free of propaganda could backfire? In order to examine the activities of official microbloggers, this study analyses three microblogs maintained by prominent Propaganda Department officials. First, it utilizes content analysis to evaluate the extent to which provincial-level officials "market dictatorship" via commentary that is designed to shape public values and perspectives on the regime (Brady 2008). The

practice of *zhengwu weibo* is thus explored as a new variant of state propaganda, which is defined as communication designed to inform or educate citizens in order to guide their thoughts and actions and elevate support for the regime. Second, as a way of assessing possible changes in state–society relations, the article considers the extent to which official microbloggers encounter resistance from China’s ram-bunctious and even “uncivil” internet users. Third, the paper evaluates the ways in which propagandists handle pushback as a means of gaining insights into the capability of cadres to utilize *weibo* as well as the potential persuasiveness of their messaging. Finally, the study contributes to existing research that treats Chinese government behaviour affecting internet content, whether propaganda or censorship, as a means of assessing state preferences concerning the maintenance of political stability and one-party rule (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Noesselt 2013; Esarey and Xiao 2014).

Soft-Sell Hypothesis

The above objectives led to the testing of three hypotheses that emerge out of scholarship on the internet and governance in China. While in the Mao period Chinese propaganda work was characterized by overt appeals to mass audiences based on “one-size-fits-all approaches”, propaganda in the Dengist Reform Era has become more nuanced and even covert, with the rise of public service advertising (公益广告, *gongyi guanggao*) and anonymous “fifty-cent army” commentators guiding public opinion online (Stockmann 2011; Han 2013; Yang 2012: 290). Thus, it is hypothesized that official microbloggers will emphasize positive elements of CCP rule in an effort to boost popular perception of the regime’s performance and highlight the potential for citizens to find happiness, prosperity or personal fulfilment in status-quo China. Yet these propaganda efforts will be subtle, eschewing overt references to regime ideology and to what Perry Link calls “official language” to avoid a backlash from youthful readers who disapprove of bureaucratise in cyberspace (Link 2013: 243–260). Official microblog postings will also be leavened with non-political, cultural and personal subject matter to make their content more appealing to readers. The hypothesis (H1) that *zhengwu weibo* will emphasize a positive view of the political status quo, feature subtle efforts to influence public opinion, articulate positions in common language and contain a mixture of political and non-political content

is referred to in shorthand as the “soft sell”. The identification of related posts by official microbloggers will be seen as corroboration of this hypothesis, with falsification associated with the absence of characteristics outlined above.

Pushback Hypothesis

The study further hypothesizes (H2) that despite a cautious approach to propaganda work, cadres’ microblogging will result in challenges by other users. China’s youthful internet users are known for venting frustration over the rising cost of living, perceived absence of economic opportunities, political corruption and environmental pollution; these passions could readily be directed against official microbloggers (Yang and Zheng 2012; Szablewicz 2014). The main drivers of what will be called the “pushback” hypothesis are what Yang Guobin has called a “culture of contention” among netizens; suspicion about the political motivations of cadres; and the view that *zhengwu weibo* posts, like those of other internet commentators, are legitimate subjects of discussion, contention or even derision (Yang 2009: 14). Determining whether or not netizens choose to contest cadres’ assertions via *weibo* is necessary for making tentative assessments concerning the potential of “propaganda 2.0” to induce greater political stability. The hypothesis will be seen as corroborated through the identification of public responses to posts by official microbloggers that contest their claims, meaning or intentions, with falsification associated with the absence of pushback related to cadres’ commentary.

Failure-to-Interact Hypothesis

The *weibo* medium is dynamic and highly interactive, as compared to the print and television media that have long been mainstays of CCP propaganda. If official microbloggers elicit responses from the public, controversial or otherwise, but fail to address criticism or attempt to persuade readers through interaction with other users, it is probable that official microblogging will be of limited utility for advancing the regime’s larger goals of elevating popular support and fostering political stability, although it is possible that *weibo* may help cadres to better gauge public opinion. Unresponsiveness or the failure to interact is likely to leave netizens with the impression that cadres are “aliens”

in the *weibo* medium and out of sync with contemporary internet culture.

While in recent years the CCP has become more responsive to public pressure, officials are primarily accountable to their higher-ups, who determine an individual's prospects for promotion in China's nomenklatura system (Kung and Chen 2011: 31; Yang, Xu, and Tao 2014: 865; Fewsmith 2011: 292). Moreover, as *zhengwu weibo* is a relatively new form of political communication and as cadres are accustomed to top-down communication with the public, official microbloggers are unlikely to engage citizens in free-wheeling and highly interactive conversations. Therefore, this study hypothesizes (H3) that official microbloggers will infrequently interact with the public on *weibo*. In shorthand, this hypothesis will be referred to as "failure to interact". The absence of frequent interaction between official microbloggers and their readers will be treated as corroboration of failure to interact, with falsification associated with substantial evidence of interaction.

The Rise of Microblogs

The rapid proliferation of internet use in China has provided 650 million Chinese unprecedented opportunities for political expression and dramatically reduced barriers for organizing collective action, thereby posing a threat to the authoritarian regime and forcing the state to try harder to censor information. The fact that over 80 per cent of Chinese internet users access the web via cell phones has also contributed to the popularity of microblogging, a medium that allows more than 275 million Chinese to share information, photos, music and videos with their online communities (CNNIC 2014). Although *weibo* sites resemble Twitter, they evince important differences concerning the creation and circulation of user content (Svensson 2014: 172). To a greater extent than on Twitter, the content-based conversation threads of *weibo* can enable a single comment to snowball into a highly interactive conversation involving a local, national or even international audience unless action is taken by a corporate or state entity to suppress content seen as threatening to stability, morally unacceptable or conducive to social mobilization.

Microblogs have been associated with public outcry in response to abuses of power by officials or their children (Sullivan 2013: 7);

breaking stories ahead of mass media; and pushback against censorship by journalists (Repnikova 2014: 125–126). The decisions of Chinese elite increasingly reflect public opinion expressed online in order to take steps to improve governance and legitimacy (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013: 340; Noesselt 2013: 6; Sullivan 2013: 8).

Although Chinese communication scholars hailed 2010 as the breakthrough year for microblogging, shortly thereafter local governments across the country launched a major drive to encourage the creation of *zhengwu weibo* or “official microblogs”. In late 2011, the Deputy Director of the CCP’s Central Propaganda Department, Wang Chen, was quoted by Chinese media as exhorting local cadres to effectively use the *weibo* medium and “to occupy these strategic spaces in the interest of developing a healthy and uplifting internet culture” (*Nanfang Ribao* 2011; Schlaeger and Jiang 2014: 190). As of late 2012, government institutions hosted well over 100,000 microblogs; individual Chinese Communist Party (CCP) cadres and state employees ran more than 50,000 *weibo* sites on China’s two largest major microblog service provider platforms (People’s Daily Online Public Opinion Center 2012a: 16, 2012b: 14). Institutional *weibo* sites ranged from those maintained by the State Council and the Foreign Ministry to provincial CCP Youth Leagues and municipal police departments. Some official microbloggers have attracted very large audiences. As of December 2012, China’s top official microblogger, Cai Qi, the Director of the CCP Organization Department in Zhejiang Province, had an audience in excess of eight million, or more than four times the official circulation of the popular Guangdong-based newspaper, *Nanfang Zhoumo* (南方周末, *Southern Weekly*) (People’s Daily Online Public Opinion Center 2012b: 42; *Nanfang Baoyewang* 2012).

Central-level political support for official microblogging has been associated with the decision released after the Sixth Plenum of the 17th Chinese Communist Party Congress in October 2011. The decision called for the “development of a healthy online culture”, “strengthening the guidance of public opinion online”, “promoting the ideology and culture of the main melody” and “strengthening the management of social media online and the tools of rapid information dissemination” (*Xinhua* 2011). An examination of the dates on which official microblogging sites were established, however, suggests that many local governments had already embraced the idea well in

advance of the Sixth Plenum, and that the Sixth Plenum decision represented the encouragement of ongoing developments.

To grasp the motivation of local cadres to embrace microblogging, it is crucial to understand the extent to which grassroots unrest makes local cadres feel vulnerable. Many factors have contributed to the crisis of confidence in the local state in the Reform Era. The size and indebtedness of local governments grew rapidly in the 1990s, giving rise to predatory forms of taxation and land seizures to raise funds for state coffers (Cai 2010: 72–73; Bernstein and Lü 2003). Protests of various types have risen steadily. Under the “responsibility system” (责任追究制, *zheren zhuijiu zhi*), local cadres are evaluated for promotion by their superiors in terms of their ability to maintain social order (Feng 2013: 5). Moreover, the frequent transfer of officials weakens their ties to local communities (Fewsmith 2011: 271; Yu 2003).

As political scientist Jae Ho Chung has observed,

maintaining stability and ensuring survival are the principal goals of any political regime. China is no exception, regardless of whether its rulers were emperors, generalissimos or general secretaries (Chung 2011: 297).

The CCP-led central government has backed a number of initiatives to improve the public’s perception of the local state, including the introduction of village elections, the restriction of local governments’ taxation power, the prosecution of corrupt officials and the solicitation of input from citizens and social groups. Despite these efforts, opinion polls indicate that trust in local government is lower than trust in central government (Shi 2008: 228); a prominent study of rural Chinese politics suggests the local state is frequently the target of protesters appealing to the central government to protect their legal rights (O’Brien and Li 2006).

For local officials whose prospects for promotion are affected by the political stability in the administrative areas they oversee, the use of *weibo* as a tool to improve governance and guide public opinion has considerable appeal. The *2011 Official Microblogger Evaluative Report* noted that political microblogs are crucial platforms for improving government transparency, public service and the understanding of public opinion (National E-Government Research Center 2012). A study that encouraged local officials to start *weibo* sites, the “Tengxun Report on Microblogging in Zhejiang”, praises political microblogs as

a mechanism for improving guidance of news and public opinion, enabling officials to hear the voices of citizens, permitting officials to rapidly understand people's demands, solidifying the government's image, increasing interaction with citizens, improving state–society communication and encouraging political participation by social groups (*Tengxun* 2011). Microblogging service providers have also courted officials as users in order to increase traffic and to provide microblogging sites with a measure of protection against government-mandated shutdowns, such as the one that proved devastating to China's first popular microblog site, Fanfou.com (饭否), on 7 July 2009. In short, there are many reasons for local officials to view official microblogging as potentially helpful to improving state–society relations, contributing to political stability and elevating cadres' prospects of promotion to higher office. Yet the challenge of utilizing the fast-moving and contentious *weibo* medium is considerable.

Research Methods

To investigate the uses of political microblogging as a mechanism for improving propaganda work, maintaining stability through the guidance of public opinion, promoting state–society dialogue and even mollifying angry citizens, three microblog sites maintained by provincial-level cadres were selected for analysis. The microbloggers were Zhang Jianhua, Hu Jian and Lü Huanbin, each of whom held the position of Deputy Director of Operations (常务副部长, *changwu fubuzhang*) in the Propaganda Department of the CCP in Jiangsu Province, Zhejiang Province and the provincial-level Xinjiang Autonomous Region, respectively. The “2011 China Governmental Microblogging Evaluative Report” rated Zhang, Lü and Hu among China's top 100 official microbloggers. As of August 2012, Zhang Jianhua's site listed his audience at nearly 1.7 million; Lü Huanbin had an audience over 426,000; Hu Jian, the most prolific writer of the three, had more than 355,000 followers. From the government's perspective, these microbloggers represent the vanguard of a new type of propagandist: They were senior propaganda workers who possessed a nuanced grasp of CCP ideology and had the capacity to reach large audiences of internet users. While other scholars have examined *weibo* maintained by state institutions, this is one of the first empirical stud-

ies focusing on *weibo* maintained by prominent CCP cadres (Schlaeger and Jiang 2014: 193; National E-Government Research Center 2012).

One month of microblogging content for the sites maintained by Zhang, Lü and Hu was randomly selected for content analysis. In addition, copious tweets before and after the sample month (August 2011) were read in order to place the commentary of these microbloggers into a broader context. The primary research method was content analysis. In August 2012, a coding protocol was created, tested and implemented for sorting the sampled microblog content by main topic, time of posting, writer–audience interaction and the use of original or forwarded material, photos and videos. One concern with evaluating Chinese internet content one year after its initial posting is that government or corporate censors could have deleted content, contributing to selection bias. However, careful consideration of the microblog sites (where written notices and audience comments typically mention deletions) suggests that few posts had been deleted, including reader comments, although it remains possible that some material was removed from the sample prior to analysis. To eliminate intercoder reliability problems resulting from the evaluation of content by multiple human coders, the author accessed, read and evaluated every tweet posted during the selected month, with the unit of analysis as the individual *weibo* post. The official microblog content was thus entirely analysed by a single coder; no software was utilized. In addition, responses to posts were read to evaluate audience perceptions. Researchers interested in accessing the original Chinese-language posts and audience responses discussed below will find the URLs in the “References” section of the article.

Meet the Microbloggers

The three writers had above-average levels of education and were of similar ages but had been on different career trajectories prior to assuming their positions in the Propaganda Department, the branch of the CCP responsible for media control, political indoctrination and ideological guidance. Zhang Jianhua, 53, was born in Yixing Municipality, Jiangsu Province, and worked as a journalist and editor at *Yixing Daily* prior to studying at Fudan University’s Journalism Department. He later served as the publisher of *Eastern Culture Weekly* (东方文化周刊, *Dongfang Wenhua Zhoukan*), a professor at the Nanjing Uni-

versity Graduate School of Journalism, Deputy Director of the Jiangsu Provincial Broadcasting Bureau, Director of the Jiangsu Provincial Television Station and Director of the Jiangsu Province Culture Office. Zhang held the last position alongside his post as Deputy Director of operations at the Propaganda Department (*Xinhua Baoyewang* 2009).

Lü Huanbin, 51, a native of Changsha, Hunan, received his bachelor's and master's degrees from Hunan Normal University. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Lü was a major player in Hunan Province's media scene, serving as Director of the Propaganda Centre at Hunan Economic Television, president of Hunan Economic Television, and vice-chairman of the Hunan provincial media group, Golden Eagle Broadcasting System. In March of 2011, he assumed the position of Deputy Director of Operations at the Xinjiang Autonomous Region's Propaganda Department (Zhou 2010).

Hu Jian, 55, was born in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province. Hu attended Zhejiang Sci-Tech University (浙江理工大学, *Zhejiang Ligong Daxue*), where he focused on silk manufacture. Hu later received his master's degree at the Central Party School in Beijing, worked in the Zhejiang Province CCP Organization Department and served as the editor-in-chief of the Organization Department's magazine, *Pioneers of the Times* (时代先锋, *Shidai Xianfeng*). Hu also headed the Organization Department in the Shaoxing Municipality and was Deputy Director of the Zhejiang Provincial Organization Department prior to transferring to the Propaganda Department as Deputy Director of Operations (*Tengxun Xinwen* 2013).

Zhang Jianhua, Lü Huanbin and Hu Jian all had distinguished careers in propaganda work prior to joining the ranks of the official microbloggers whose sites provide their real names and professional titles. The three writers had extensive prior experience in the media industry and were steeped in party ideology by virtue of their training, career trajectory and leadership roles, as of the time the study was conducted. Lü Huanbin had a distinguished media career in his home province before leaving, in the words of one of his *weibo* followers, to "defend the borders" in Xinjiang, a place to which Lü did not have a deep personal connection. Zhang and Hu lived in, and often tweeted about, life in their native provinces, a situation that may have made it easier for them to connect with audiences in Jiangsu and Zhejiang.

Content Analysis Results

After coding all 229 microblog posts written by Zhang, Lü and Hu in August of 2011, it was clear that there was substantial variation among the three in terms of their total number of postings, amount of author-generated material, topics emphasized, interactive use of the microblogging medium, direct interaction with their audiences, use of images and re-posting of content from other *weibo* or internet sites. These writers wrote mostly about non-political topics and seldom posted overtly political propaganda. Rather, they emphasized concepts and values tangentially related to the preservation or acceptance of the status quo. The public did question, criticize and debate the posts of official microbloggers; the official microbloggers seldom responded to this pushback. Only Hu Jian mentioned reader criticism of his ideas, and twice he even re-posted readers' caustic assertions along with his reply. Zhang's and Lü's use of the medium for interactive communication was very low, and in this sense differed from popular microbloggers, who often engage individual followers in public conversations. Overall, communication by Zhang, Hu and Lü was mostly unidirectional – from sender to receiver – in a manner characteristic of “traditional” media, such as television and newspapers, corroborating a key finding of a study on an institutional official microblog (Schlaeger and Jiang 2014: 200). On numerous occasions, members of the public asked the three cadres questions or commented on their posts. Zhang never responded to citizens' attempts to initiate a public dialogue; Lü interacted with his readers only three times and never addressed subjects of political sensitivity such as media freedom or Uyghur empowerment in Xinjiang. Nearly one-third of Hu Jian's posts were responses to supportive remarks by readers; the nature of his interaction online receives further consideration below.

Zhang Jianhua had the fewest posts during the period analysed, only 24 over the course of one month (see Table 1). All of Zhang's entries were original material (no re-tweets). More of Zhang's readers re-circulated his commentary than the followers of either Hu or Lü. Each of Zhang Jianhua's posts was re-tweeted an average of 32 times. This may seem surprising, as Zhang never responded to direct communication from readers and his posts did not contain a single photo or video. It bears noting that Zhang's readership was over three times the size of Lü Huanbin's or Hu Jian's; the higher rate at which

Zhang’s commentaries were recirculated is not necessarily an indication that his writing was more popular among readers.

Table 1: Zhang Jianhua’s Microblog

	Frequency
Original content	24
Prominent topics:	
• Lifestyle	9
• Politics	6
• Writing/microblogging	4
• Family	3
Re-posts material from other site	0
Responses to audience queries	0
Average number of audience re-posts	32
Post containing photo or video	0
Total posts	24
Microblog site URL	< www.weibo.com/u/1811891453 >

Source: Authors’ own compilation.

Note: Analysis period 3–31 August 2011.

Lü Huanbin posted more sporadically than Hu Jian, but Lü’s postings (59, in total) usually appeared in rapid-fire succession. The majority of Lü Huanbin’s posts were accompanied by photos and video clips depicting Xinjiang’s natural scenery, art and sporting events. Each of his posts was re-circulated by an average of 21 readers (see Table 2).

Table 2: Lü Huanbin’s Microblog

	Frequency
Original content	31
Prominent topics:	
• Art	16
• Media industry	11
• Nature/weather	8
• Travel/tourism	7
• Politics	7
Re-posts material from other site	43

	Frequency
Responses to audience queries	3
Average number of audience re-posts	21
Post containing photo or video	40
Total posts	59
Microblog site URL	< www.weibo.com/bigbaozhen >

Source: Authors' own compilation.

Note: Analysis period 2–30 August 2011.

Table 3: Hu Jian's Microblog

	Frequency
Original content	127
Prominent topics:	
• Lifestyle	30
• Social values	26
• Education	14
• Politics	13
• Nature/weather	11
Re-posts material from other site	95
Responses to audience queries	55
Average number of audience re-posts/ comments*	15
Post containing photo or video	43
Total posts	146
Microblog site URL**	< http://t.qq.com/hujianzi >

Source: Authors' own compilation.

Note: Analysis period 1–31 August 2011.

* Hu Jian used the TENGXUN platform, which does not provide statistics differentiating between audience re-tweets and comments.

** Hyperlinks to Hu Jian's microblog posts from 2011 and his readers' replies are no longer available via his main site, although his more recent entries may be found via the hyperlink above. Hu's prior posts are accessible via links provided in the References section.

Hu Jian was the most prolific of the three microbloggers, posting material 146 times in a month. He wrote consistently, usually in the

early morning, early afternoon and evening, averaging 4.7 tweets per day. Hu's tweets were re-tweeted less frequently, on average, than the tweets of Zhang or Lü. Nearly one-third of Hu Jian's posts contained photos of flowers, ponds and curious architectural features, many of which were snapshots he took in daily life. Just 10 per cent of Hu's comments concerned politics, as compared to 25 per cent for Zhang Jianhua and 23 per cent for Lü Huanbin (see Table 3 for details).

(H1) Soft Sell of Values

Although these official microbloggers did not conceal their identities, they seldom mentioned their work for the Propaganda Department. The writers also rarely posted content that was clearly propaganda, or communication obviously designed to guide the political thinking or actions of citizens, boost compliance with state policies or deepen acceptance of specific components of regime ideology. Zhang, Lü and Hu avoided using official language and infrequently utilized their sites to announce government campaigns, events or initiatives. They gave political subjects less attention than non-political and relatively uncontroversial topics. Instead, Zhang, Lü and Hu shared personal anecdotes, lifestyle advice, memories from their youth, tips on education and commentary on natural beauty, and wrote of their artistic interests. Their commentary, in other words, softened their image as ranking cadres responsible for propaganda work. Frequently, their tweets blurred the boundary between official duties and private life, allowing the official microbloggers to tap into the vitality of the *weibo* user community in ways that formulaic official language would fail to achieve. Zhang Jianhua's announcement of his father's death, for example, prompted his highest single-tweet spike in audience comments (Zhang 2011a).

The frequency with which the official microbloggers posted non-political commentary, relative to political content, seemed to reflect a desire to put a human face on propaganda and ideological work. Through a subtle emphasis on the normative merit of China's political and social status quo, these microbloggers sought the public's empathy, acceptance and support. Moreover, their frequent use of *weibo* implied that connecting with younger citizens (the majority of users) is valued by ranking cadres in the propaganda system, who seek to influence citizens and presumably receive input from them as well. Posts made by Zhang, Hu and Lü sought to convince readers

that obtaining self-satisfaction was possible through the elevation of moral standards, diligence, education and thoughtful reflection on real-life experience – messages that were softly neo-Confucian in the sense that they implied everyone could find happiness through greater attention to self-improvement. The tone of most tweets was confident, encouraging, upbeat. Their messages were written in colloquial language (rather than the less accessible “party speak” that is standard fare at important CCP meetings) and could be quite creatively expressed. For example, Hu Jian wrote:

On tentacles. The octopus has many tentacles. Every tentacle has many suction cups; the octopus has a high level of sensitivity and is the most intelligent creature in the sea [...]. People need to have many suction cups like the octopus. They must broadly explore many areas and absorb the sources of knowledge and wisdom. To do so means they become broadly adaptable and discover opportunities for development everywhere, or they gather many types of knowledge and methods rooted in experience that can be immediately used. This requires travelling widely (Hu 2011e).

Hu Jian’s creative comment was greeted enthusiastically by many readers, who re-tweeted the post or commented 222 times. A few hours later, Hu Jian re-tweeted the following response by Jiang Jian (蒋剑), implying that Hu approved of its message:

When we are travelling, we should walk around more, look around more, paying attention to the details nearby. Then, we should collect our thoughts on the broader good; after some time, knowledge will come naturally. When our eyes open to the world, our thinking becomes more sensitive, and we will feel many things. This all requires going out to experience things ourselves. Whether this is good or bad, once is insufficient, requiring another time, until we learn grace and mirth, until we master courage and tolerance (Jiang 2011).

Jiang Jian’s tweet was itself re-circulated or commented on 63 times.

In postings suggestive of the soft sell, Hu Jian urged his readers to consider the tremendous influence of *weibo* on their work and everyday lives and the importance of ideology as a source of guidance, asserting that people could achieve happiness through *weibo* use and a healthy and peaceful lifestyle (Hu 2011b, 2011c). Hu also wrote about such government successes as the implementation of the “spokesperson system” (发言人制度, *fayanren zhidu*) to regularly and rapidly dis-

seminate information (Hu 2011a). Similarly, Zhang Jianhua praised the effectiveness of government institutions in creating an equitable environment replete with opportunities for China's youth (Zhang 2011e) and voiced pleasure at the “freedom”, “dynamism” and “simple beauty” of the opening ceremony at an athletic championship in Shenzhen (Zhang 2011c). Lü Huanbin lauded government plans to renovate a dilapidated district in Kashgar while maintaining its traditional charm (Lü 2011a) and wrote of a CCP committee meeting at which the subject of *naan* (a type of bread) was discussed as an area for development in the food industry (Lü 2011b). Messages such as these spoke of the promise for happiness in China and highlighted governmental actions to provide for the public's welfare, providing corroboration of the soft-sell hypothesis.

(H2) Pushback

The tendency of Zhang Jianhua, Lü Huanbin and Hu Jian to emphasize the positive and to avoid sensitive political topics did not prevent netizens from introducing controversy into conversations that responded to the cadres' tweets. Ostensibly non-political posts sparked startling pushback from audiences accustomed to interrogating online expression. Less than one month after the high-speed train collision in Wenzhou killed 40 people, Jiangsu Province's Zhang Jianhua wrote:

The high-speed railway has reduced its speed. Because of this, I am thinking isn't it the case that in many other areas speed should also be reduced? The answer is absolutely. Moving at high speeds for a long period of time, so many things get compressed, it is very easy for problems to occur, even to flip a car [翻车, *fan che*]. Society is like this. Economics is like this. People are also like this (Zhang 2011d).

Thirty-four members of Zhang's audience re-tweeted this comment. Most responses were supportive calling Zhang “wise” or his tweet “good” or “moving”. Philadelphia World (费城世界, Feicheng shijie) wrote: “Although many people have said this, when you, a person with this kind of status, says this, it really makes people respectful” (Feicheng shijie 2011). Others expressed scepticism or mentioned the high-speed railway's poor safety record. Zhouqianjin Baby (周千金 baby) wrote, “Yes, but is it easy to slow down?” (Zhouqianjin Baby

2011). Three minutes later, SamsGuo tweeted “The high-speed railway is like China’s Great Leap Forward! Reflect on this!” (SamsGuo 2011).

A close reading of responses to commentary by official microbloggers indicated that readers commonly challenge their posts, as the pushback hypothesis (H2) asserts. Even rather innocuous tweets, including those suggestive of the soft sell, were contested, and conversations turned toward issues that were only tangentially related to the original message. Controversy courted each writer to varying degrees, as readers embraced, contested, lampooned and pontificated over tweets by the propagandists. Hu Jian’s post on ideology (思想, *sixiang*) was re-tweeted or re-circulated or commented on by 533 members of his audience, revealing the maelstrom of responses to commentary by China’s official microbloggers:

On ideology. I don’t know what the world would be like without ideology. Ideology guides action. Only when one thinks clearly can one act clearly. One’s greatest fear is a high level of confusion. Ideology must prioritize science, not confused thinking and wild thoughts. It must prioritize standards and not calculate in the dark. It must prioritize methods, not lurch to the north and withdraw to the south. It must prioritize the exchange of ideas, not idiotic thoughts in the dark. The exchange of ideas adds value to ideology. Bringing ideology to microblogging is like a dandelion in the breeze. The seeds of ideology are broadcast great distances (Hu 2011c).

While not overtly political or directly related to the ruling party’s ideology, Hu’s comment was a subtle reference to the CCP’s normative position on the role of ideology in Chinese society, which includes the belief that Sinified Marxism is scientific ideology that requires standardization to prevent confusion (Ji 2012: 100). Yang Yufeng’s response suggested displeasure:

If people who aren’t moaning like a sick person or throwing tantrums can claim to have ideology, then everyone should just go to their mistress. There should be less wild thinking and more reflection on experience. Otherwise, as soon as people contemplate ideology God will laugh (Yang 2011).

Xixi Gongzhu (希西公主) took the conversation in a more intellectual direction: “The famous economist John Maynard Keynes said the

main driver of social transformation is not interests but ideology” (Xixi Gongzhu 2011). Sun Yanbo responded:

Individuals have individual ideology, groups have group ideology, nations have national ideology; individual ideology can be distinguished between lifestyle attitudes, ideals and values; group and national ideologies are composed of individual ideologies and determine the direction of development for nations and groups (Sun 2011).

Wang Bin, whose site gave his title as the secretary of the party group (分团委书记, *fentuanwei shuji*) at Zhejiang University’s College of Electrical Engineering, addressed the difficulty of transmitting ideology:

Taking your own ideology and putting it into someone else’s mind, serving as the source of guidance, you frequently have to consider how those who market ideals are brainwashing others in order to determine if their ideological work is really effective (Wang 2011).

Maocao responded to his remark sardonically, “Ideology is like underwear: You have to have it, but you don’t exhibit it for everyone to see.” (Maocao 2011).

Not infrequently, postings by Zhang, Hu and Lü precipitated more direct pushback from sceptical readers. For example, Hu Jian wrote:

Go down to the grassroots. A national campaign in the media sector is beginning to “go to the lower levels, shift work styles and change writing styles”. Now some journalists are writing news from the office and they do not have lively material. If they aren’t moved emotionally, who will be moved? Some can see but do not experience burning-hot lifestyles. Lifestyles are so rich and colourful, but reports are flat and powerless. The emergence of micro-blogs’ short and swift style has become a challenge. Going down to the grassroots is a required course [必修课, *bixiuke*] for those working in journalism. Using one’s feet to write the news [用脚写新闻, *yongjiao xie xinwen*] is the only way to provide news that is truly good (Hu 2011d).

Although a number of readers indicated their approval, Hu’s comment sparked a major debate about such topics as media freedom, journalism law (新闻法, *xinwenfa*), and even excessive oversight of the propaganda system. In a post that was deleted and then reposted,

Lijian6789 wrote: “We need a journalism law. Don’t trample on media freedom. Full protection for the freedom and rights of media and media personnel is fundamental” (Jia 2011).

Five minutes later, reader Mao Junbo, concurred forcefully:

What should we do if the report has been written but it cannot be published?! The Propaganda Department does not reflect upon itself but blames journalists! It is too hilarious! Look at the example of the [Wenzhou] high-speed train incident. All that empty speech. How is that writing with one’s heart? In what direction do you want people to shift their efforts? I couldn’t stop myself from saying a few words for my journalist friends (Mao 2011).

These replies led to a chorus of re-tweets as microbloggers shared Mao’s comment with their followers. At 8:55 a.m. on 11 August, microbloggers began to re-post a comment by Lijian6789 containing a quote attributed to CCP economic planner and former revolutionary, Chen Yun:

In the Republican period there was a journalism law, we CCP members carefully researched its every word to grasp its essence and inadequacies. Now that we have power, I think it’s still better that we don’t have a journalism law. Without a law, we can be proactive. We can control whatever we want to control (Tianchengzuozhihu 2011).

Microblogger Liu Bo responded, “I propose the drafting of a ‘journalism law’” (Liu 2011). Tang Qianjun and others posted a pessimistic appraisal of the likelihood of such a reform: “Despite countless appeals, a journalism law has failed to appear” (Tang 2011).

This sort of direct appeal for reform and strong criticism of government policies in the context of a conversation involving a powerful representative of the party-state is rare in Chinese politics. Such exchanges are seldom seen in Chinese public forums and almost never appear in China’s mass media. The political and economic constraints imposed on media by the central and local branches of the Propaganda Department simply do not permit the dissemination of such views.

The pushback that Hu Jian’s post precipitated was far from an isolated occurrence; it was also not the most extreme. Heated, even profane, expression of dissent was voiced by microbloggers concerned with the rights of Uyghurs and deteriorating public security in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region, where Lü Huanbin was based.

Two years prior to the period under consideration by this study, the accusation that six Uyghur factory workers in Guangdong had raped two Han women led to violent reprisals by Han workers that were captured on video and circulated online. Peaceful protests by Uyghurs in Xinjiang led to a government crackdown, bloody inter-ethnic conflict and the decision by authorities to shut down the internet in Xinjiang for ten months (Millward 2009: 349–352; Cliff 2012: 80; Morozov 2011: 259–260; Sullivan 2013: 5). Despite subsequent efforts to ameliorate bad blood with capital investment, development plans and the resignation or removal of Xinjiang officials, including the party secretary, Wang Lequan, considerable tensions remained between the party-state and the Han and Uyghur populations (Cliff 2012). Lü Huanbin’s 15 August tweet about a Hong Kong film crew’s production of a documentary called *Strong Xinjiang Dream* (强疆梦, *qiangjiangmeng*) prompted angry responses from readers on the lookout for racism and disregard of Uyghur perspectives as well as from Han ethno-nationalists and government sympathizers. From 15 to 19 August, Lü’s microblog became a virtual battleground over ethnic rights, Han nationalism and the portrayal of Xinjiang in the media. Lü’s post read as follows:

Strong Xinjiang Dream aims to preserve the truth of a great history and speaks for greater Xinjiang. The great film by Hong Kong Satellite Television (HKS) is led by Mr. Yang Jinling, who started production today. I went to get a sense for the atmosphere, which was passionate and strong (Lü 2011c).

Minutes later, Kaishui daren (开水大人) wrote,

Go have your dream. It has lost its strength. Is [Xinjiang] strong compared to Africa? Every day it is like Afghanistan. Just leaving the house requires courage. This group of Hong Kongers has come to laugh at Xinjiang. You princelings who accompany them are the happy readers of books (Kaishui daren 2011).

Nearly 30 minutes later, Guansiji (关斯基) posted,

So long as the dream doesn’t remain on a superficial level it will be fine. Do more for the masses, otherwise the power of *weibo* is truly frightening (Guansiji 2011).

In a post that was subsequently deleted, Saerdna815 wrote at 8:38 p.m.: “A dream that neglects the Uyghurs and other ethnicities will

forever be a dream”. 0jingmin0 (0井民0), a journalist with the *Xinjiang Economic Newspaper* (新疆经济报, *Xinjiang Jingjibao*), wrote, “It’s always good to have dreams” (0jingmin0 2011). At 12:23 a.m. on 16 August, MadanAMn (瑪蛋, AMn) tweeted,

Let’s take a look at the [film’s] contents. Xinjiang’s dream must be fulfilled by all ethnicities. Can we rely on Hong Kongers for this? They should make their film and leave! (MadanAMn 2011)

Utilizing a word written in pinyin, presumably to reduce the likelihood that the comment would be deleted by censors, DU Zhangfu (DU 丈夫) wrote “Old Yang is at the centre of a dream of rape” (DU Zhangfu 2011). Nanfang de feng 2010 (南方的风 2010) tweeted, “I am looking forward to Mr. Yang’s *Strong Xinjiang Dream*” (Nanfang de feng 2010 2011). Energy zai lushang (Energy 在路上) expressed exasperation at the direction of the conversation:

I hope that “Strong Xinjiang Dream” is not just a slogan. We have struggled for so many years and still there are so many misunderstandings. Figuring out how to make people understand the real Xinjiang is a weighty responsibility. I support you! Let’s work together to realize a “Strong Xinjiang Dream”! (Energy zai lushang 2011)

Yantong yijing (炎瞳一境) continued sarcastically, “Today the strongest in greater China are not the heroes of history but the Municipal Urban Administrative and Law Enforcement Bureau officers [城管 *chengguan*]” (Yantong yijing 2011). Chawu cishi (查无此狮) retorted, “A strong Xinjiang must be founded under the strong rule of a single race that cannot coexist harmoniously with a criminal race” (流氓民族, *liumang minzu*) (Chawu cishi 2011).

The type of exchange that followed Lü’s upbeat comment provided a window on the visceral tensions in Xinjiang in real time, providing clear corroboration of the pushback hypothesis. Even Guansiji’s encouragement of Lü was couched in ominous tones: More concrete work must be done to alleviate tensions, or the power of *weibo* could lead to instability. As would certainly be the case for official media reports overseen by the Xinjiang Propaganda Department, Lü Huanbin did not intervene or attempt to guide the conversation in a more politically correct direction. Indeed, he did not comment at all.

(H3) Failure to Interact

Why didn't Lü Huanbin get involved in the heated exchange over his post? One possibility is that Lü, as someone relatively new to propaganda work in Xinjiang, was unused to facing such hostility and simply did not know how to respond. Perhaps he was also uncertain as to whether it was best to acknowledge or ignore the criticism, as presumably either tactic could backfire, lessening party-state authority. On the one hand, responding to his readers' criticism could be interpreted as the tacit admission that CCP policy in Xinjiang has serious failings and even serve to encourage more criticism or dreaded offline activism. On the other hand, ignoring the unfolding debate could readily be interpreted as disregard, suggesting that Lü felt entitled to speak to his followers but not obliged to listen to their views. Certainly Lü was not ignorant of the exchange, as he needed to look no further than his phone to see evidence of intense dissatisfaction with party-state policies associated with a legacy of information control, racial inequality, restriction of religious freedom, persecution of Uyghur activists and the inability to protect the lives and property of Han residents (Bovington 2010: 8, 83–84; Brady 2012; Cliff 2012: 80). In any case, Lü's failure to respond to dissenting voices was similar to that of Zhang Jianhua, who did not interact with his readers on controversial topics. Their *weibo* use provided unambiguous corroboration of the failure-to-interact hypothesis, a result that was less obvious for Hu Jian, who ran a much more interactive site.

Unlike Lü and Zhang, Hu Jian often replied to admirers and occasionally interacted with disgruntled readers. In one instance after posting on the merits of travelling widely (a tweet quoted above), Hu Jian re-tweeted the following remark by Xiehou (邂逅): "Can't afford to eat, can't buy a house, can't afford to see a doctor, how can I possibly travel widely?" (Xiehou 2011). Hu's brief reply read: "I just met a young migrant worker who had already been to six cities" (Hu 2011f). Thus, although Hu Jian responded to his desperate reader, he did so in a way that suggested the down-and-out youth just needed to buck up. If the young migrant worker with whom Hu had met could travel to six cities, why couldn't Xiehou do the same? Hu Jian's rare interactions with critics failed to address the root cause of their problems; he did not attempt to learn more about their concerns. Compared to Zhang and Lü, even Hu Jian's more interactive *weibo* use suggested a propaganda strategy absent the egalitarian exchanges

common to *weibo* users. His much more frequent interaction with readers who complimented his tweets may well have contributed to the appeal of his site, although further research would be required to confirm this point. In summary, the microblogging of Zhang and Lü provided unambiguous corroboration of failure to interact, but this was less clearly the case in the writing of Hu Jian, as he commonly interacted with supporters but only rarely with detractors.

Discussion

At present, few researchers have systematically evaluated the practice of official microblogging in China or considered the extent to which it contributes to political stability (Schlaeger and Jiang 2014: 193). The findings of this study should therefore be regarded as a snapshot of a fascinating new type of political communication, rather than as anything approaching a conclusive account. Moreover, not all official microblogs (or microbloggers) are created equal, so to speak. Even in this small sample, there was variation in such topics considered as microblogger–reader interaction.

One noteworthy feature of this analysis of official microblogging was the finding that the propagandists tended to emphasize positive, apolitical messages written in plain language. By mixing commentary on non-threatening lifestyle issues including sports, art, culture and education with the obliquely political, the writings of these cadres revealed a nuanced approach toward encoding the regime’s preferred values into the minds of the public. Commentary associated with the soft-sell approach to propaganda encourages citizens to pursue happiness through individual improvement and the embrace of China’s status quo. The official microblogging also attempted to bridge the growing divide between the abstract, jargon-laden, somewhat ossified Sinified Marxist “official language”, which is oriented toward the CCP’s rank and file, and popular language pertaining to culture, morality and politics. The strategy of eschewing bureaucratese also reflects the recognition that official language is unpopular among China’s youth and that its use may increase pushback by readers (Link 2013: 243).

A second finding concerned the clear corroboration of the pushback hypothesis. As the strongest evidence of the pushback, the biting criticism of Lü’s tweet praising the *Strong Xinjiang Dream* docu-

mentary revealed the extent to which *weibo* has made it possible for netizens to clash with authorities as well as with each other. Readers concerned with the status of Uyghurs or sceptical of mainstream media representations of Xinjiang did not seem to worry that their comments would out them to China's internal security apparatus as opponents of the regime, suggesting the emergence of a new sense of citizen entitlement to self-representation and resistance to ideological conformity. Just as Chinese blogs proved to be a freer medium than newspapers, *weibo* has seemed a step freer than blogs, despite the ongoing and increasing prevalence of censorship.

Should one infer that the freedom to blast the party-state's inadequacies in Xinjiang and elsewhere dissipates dissent, induces stability, and improves governance? This seems plausible if cadres effectively used *weibo* as a means of evaluating the risk of public opposition on key issues and took steps to ameliorate problems identified by the public. While an excellent subject for further research, determining the extent to which cadres utilize information obtained on *weibo* and act to change unpopular policies is beyond the scope of this project. Based on a review of this sample of official microblogging, it is reasonable to infer these cadres sought to guide public opinion by persuading netizens that the regime was taking steps to improve its performance.

To what extent is *weibo* useful for cadres to better understand and accommodate public preferences? Zhang Jianhua's and Hu Jian's posts suggested that they believe in the utility of *weibo* as a means of understanding public opinion and improving government performance. Zhang urged the "relevant agencies" to use *weibo* to solicit suggestions from the public for renaming two bridges in Nanjing spanning the Yangzi (Zhang 2011b). Hu Jian told his followers to support Acting Provincial Governor Xia Baolong's open letter to netizens calling for them to submit recommendations to the provincial government and promising to act upon reasonable demands (Hu 2011g). Yet the posts by Zhang Jianhua and Lü Huanbin showed little measureable evidence that they were listening to the recommendations of their *weibo* audiences, corroborating the failure-to-interact hypothesis. As communications scholar Zhang Zhi'an has argued, strengthening interaction with netizens and listening to their voices is crucial to the further development of official microblogging (Zhang Zhi'an 2011). Although Hu Jian operated the most interactive site, his

claim that he showed “courage” as an official microblogger – presumably his willingness to interact with the public was an example of this – was ridiculed both as evidence that officials are “incredibly empty” (虚伪, *xuwei*) and as being “incomprehensible” by a self-described “P 民” or “fart person” (屁民, *pimin*) (Link and Xiao 2013: 83; Shuangyu 2011). For active microbloggers, using social media is a normal way of communicating matters both mundane and important. Rather than engendering sympathy or respect from readers, Hu’s claim to bravery emphasized the vast distance between his lifestyle and the lives of China’s digitally connected youth, who feel relatively powerless offline but much freer online. Despite Hu’s willingness to have public exchanges with his supporters, although rarely with his critics, for *weibo* to facilitate more meaningful communication between state and society, official microbloggers need to address controversial opinions in ways that suggest their posts are more than public relations. In Xinjiang, Lü Huanbin’s angry readers may well have interpreted his silence as frustrating evidence that the local state only wants to speak (and be heard) but does not take to heart input received from netizens.

How should we interpret the infrequent interaction between cadres and netizens, as asserted by failure to interact, particularly with regard to politically sensitive matters? In a well-publicized statement made at the 27 December 2011 inaugural “Xinjiang Inaugural Official Microblogging Conference” hosted in Urumqi, Lü Huanbin asserted that the government leaders of Xinjiang – including Party Secretary Zhang Chunxian, who was briefly the country’s highest-ranking official microblogger – were committed to embracing *weibo* as a means of increasing the party-state’s capacity to learn from the citizenry and to guide public opinion in Xinjiang and beyond. Lü urged party and state organizations, leading cadres and public servants to use *weibo* to “guide the public’s sentiments, respond to the public’s reasonable requests, and strengthen and renew the management of society” (*Sina.com.cn* 2011). Lü declared that microblogging has a “neutral” role in society but he also acknowledged that *weibo* have great power to mobilize, organize and connect. For the purposes of national security, Lü stressed that microblogging in Xinjiang was to be simultaneously encouraged and firmly controlled. He did not, therefore, appear to see *weibo* as intrinsically a source of stability or instability. Rather, local cadres’ active and effective participation in the medium could

strengthen their ability to govern and bolster their efforts to preserve stability. The secret to success, according to Lü, is to harness *weibo* as an interactive platform for better understanding, engaging, guiding and ruling the public. Lü's subsequent promotion to party secretary and director of the Hunan Television Station in his native Hunan Province indicates that CCP higher-ups may have approved of his views (Xiao 2013). Lü's own microblogging, however, suggests that such rhetoric is more akin to "do what I say but not what I do", as this study reveals that he rarely interacted with the public online and his *weibo* site was seldom updated after 2011. It is plausible that Lü finds silence to have greater virtue for his career advancement than what Sheena Chestnut Greitens terms state "activism", or the "degree to which a government seeks to actively shape online or social media content in ways that are favourable to the regime" (Greitens 2013: 263). An additional explanation for weak cadre–reader interaction is the high cost of responding in terms of the sheer amount of time that doing so would require, as replies by cadres to audience comments would almost certainly lead to more queries from a public eager to interact with officials who are typically inaccessible offline.

Interestingly, the writing of official microbloggers suggested they saw *weibo* as a powerful communication tool as well as a medium that could undermine traditional propaganda work. Consider, for example, the tension between Hu's assertion that *weibo* was a powerful vehicle for "spreading the seeds of ideology" and his tweet that "the emergence of microblogs' short and swift style has become a challenge" for party-led journalism (Hu 2011c, 2011d). Taken in context, the latter tweet suggests that *weibo* provides information that competes with news provided by journalists who fail to write colourful reports. The solution is reinvigorated journalism focusing on grass-roots developments. Hu's avid microblogging also indicates that he views *weibo* as a means of improving propaganda work by connecting with demographics less likely to tune into "propaganda as usual".

As an example of adaptive governance, the CCP's encouragement of official microblogging reflects the regime's desire to strengthen its capacity to lead by integrating public opinion into propaganda work in order to keep pace with China's rapidly changing information environment. However, if the *weibo* content analysed here is illustrative of broader trends, few official microbloggers appear willing to engage the public in meaningful dialogue. In such a

context, the noise of Chinese discontent is likely to rise unless the state cows or co-opts its most outspoken critics or enacts reforms that satisfy citizens who are displeased with the ruling party. The expression of dissent on *weibo* is also likely to “harden” non-Han identities, although as the tragic self-immolations in ethnographic Tibet demonstrate, the protests of the aggrieved are not necessarily an effective avenue to political reform. This study implies that the decision by official microbloggers to wade into the raucous environment of *weibo* may help to convince some citizens of the attractiveness of the political status quo, but the potential of government *weibo* to shore up political stability remains limited, unless the use of social media for state–society communication convinces citizens that the exchange of opinions online permits a greater role for the public in Chinese political life.

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