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The Discipline of Happiness: The Foucauldian Use of the “Positive Energy” Discourse in China’s Ideological Works

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Abstract

One important question about ideological works in China concerns the tension between mobilisation (encouraging public expression) and control (limiting public expression). Recently Xi Jinping’s administration has doubled down on both strategies. To study the rationale of this seemingly self-contradictory move, the authors examine the recently prominent ideological discourse of “positive energy.” Through a combination of online ethnography and discourse analysis using Foucauldian methods, we find that the discourse borrows and evolves from previous ideological works, but most importantly and distinguishably features a more dispersive, rather than centralised power structure. It penetrates popular culture and private lives, and by doing so disciplines people’s subjectivities, rather than only aiming at top-down persuasion or control. The logic of “positive energy” produces self-disciplined docile subjects, and quietly resolves the tension between mobilisation and control by having subjects internalise the interests of the state as their own good.

Keywords

China, propaganda, Foucault, popular culture

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Introduction

One important feature of Xi Jinping's administration is his strong emphasis on ideological works. Immediately after taking office, Xi stated that "ideological work is an extremely important work of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)" (Xinhua Net, 2013). Since then, scholars have noticed increasingly tightened control over propaganda and public discourses, especially in the cyberspace (Creemers, 2017). Yet behind this tightened control is a classical "dictator's dilemma": the CCP must and has mobilised public expression of support to secure its regime, but meanwhile, it also has to forcefully limit expression to prevent the backfire of public opinion. The needs of mobilisation and control are usually in tension with each other, and the state is said to maintain a fragile balance in between (Brady, 2017; Dickson, 2016).

However, a noteworthy puzzle about Xi's re-ideologisation is that, whereas previous leaders had balanced by swinging between the two options (Baum, 1994: 5–9; Brady, 2017: 138), Xi emphasises both control and mobilisation/participation more heavily than before. Xi's (2016) view on cyber-management stresses "mass line through the Internet" and "positive interactions with the grassroots," and aims at avoiding a situation where "relaxation causes chaos, control causes deadly silence" (一放就乱, 一管就死, *yifang jiuluan, yiguan jiusi*). Recently, some scholars have noted a "Maoist revival," which concerns not only centralisation, but also mass campaigns, channelling public expression and "rectification" of the mind (Yang, 2014a; Zhao, 2016). The question, then, is how the CCP reconciles mobilisation with control, especially in the post-socialist time?

One important discourse that provides a vantage point to understand this question is that of "positive energy" (正能量, *zheng nengliang*). A discourse that has caught the attention of many Chinese scholars but is yet to be studied systematically, "positive energy" appears frequently in official speeches, especially concerning public opinion management. As indexed by an official database (Renmin Shuju, 2019), its mentions in major state media reached 5,318 in 2017 and 4,427 in 2018, an impressive high compared to other important propaganda catchphrases such as "main melody" (主旋律, *zhuxuanlü*, 1,986 mentions in 2017 and 1,848 in 2018). More importantly, its popularity among the public and its depoliticised usage distinguish "positive energy" from other propaganda discourses. Its mentions among the public (indicated by the numbers of entries on the Chinese search engine Baidu using time-limited search) have continued to skyrocket since its first popularisation in 2012, even though its mentions in official media has remained stable after reaching the peak in 2015. This is especially remarkable considering that it had already received the title of "the most popular phrase (流行语, *liuxing yu*) of 2012" from the popular magazine *Yaowen Jiaozi* (咬文嚼字, *Excessive Wording*). In comparison, the mentions of "main melody" in 2018 on Baidu are only three-quarters of those of "positive energy," and those of "China dream" are only half of positive energy (despite its larger number in official media). As discussed below, positive energy originated from public discussions of everyday life topics, and is used frequently in popular culture. Therefore, an important question about this discourse is how it can dominate both official propaganda and public discourses for years, being simultaneously highly politicised and highly depoliticised. On a broader scale, this reflects the aforementioned puzzle about how to mobilise and control expression at once.

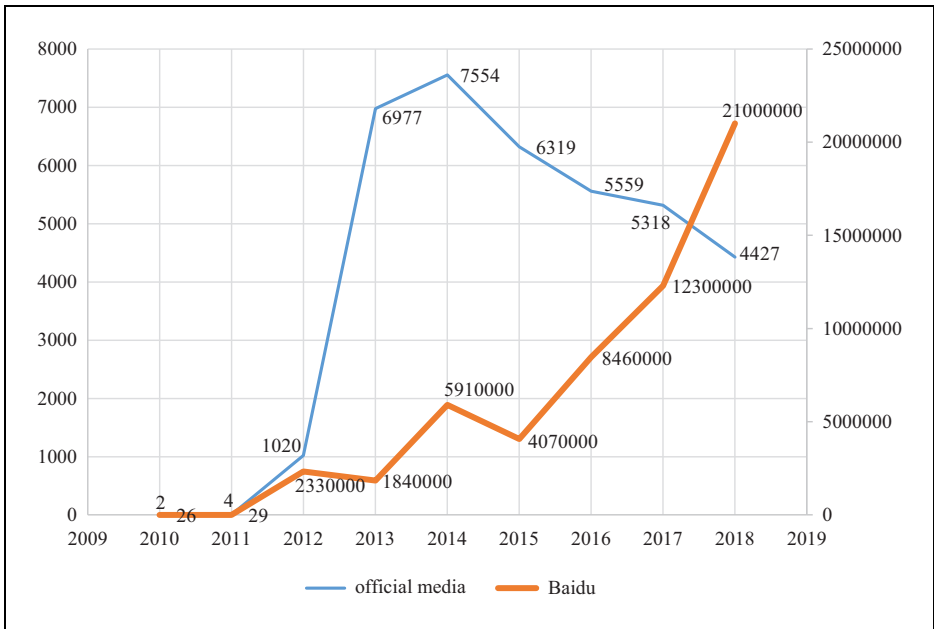


Figure 1. Number of mentions of “Positive Energy” on Official Media and on Baidu by Year. Source: Authors’ own compilation.

This article aims at deciphering the Janus face of the positive energy discourse, and looks beyond the discourse per se to analyse the Janus face of China’s recent ideological works. We dissect positive energy using the Foucauldian methods of discourse analysis. In addition to conventional propaganda techniques such as agenda setting and framing, the discourse complicates the power relations in the ideological field through a range of disciplinary techniques. Built on a dispersive power structure with a depoliticised language, it aims at shaping the subjectivity of citizens rather than mere persuasion or control. The tension between encouraging and limiting expression is, under the logic of positive energy, resolved by making citizens internalise the interests of the state.

We first examine literatures on China’s ideological works and positive energy, showing that the CCP has traditionally used a richer repertoire than persuasion and control. Then, after introducing methodological and theoretical frameworks, we trace the development of the positive energy discourse and compare it with propaganda projects in post-Tiananmen China before Xi. Following the comparison, we analyse the Foucauldian mechanisms of positive energy to see how it serves the evolving needs of ideological works.

Continuity and Change in Ideological Works

Despite the “end of ideology” prophesy, ideology continues to play an indispensable role in post-Mao China, supporting the otherwise unstable legitimacy of the CCP. The new

ideological work we try to dissect here is one of the many experiments in the CCP's history. Whether the party-state decides that legitimacy should come from nationalism or (economic) performance, the official ideology usually manages to adapt itself to the changing emphases, thus providing normative justification, defining proper ends, and mobilising subordinates' consent (Holbig, 2013).

As Perry (2017) pointed out, cultural governance has been crucial to China's ideology since early revolutionary years. The CCP has skilfully deployed various symbolic resources to pursue political goals, and direct persuasion is only part of the repertoire. Indeed, persuasion, especially in the politically polarising cyberspace, is inefficient and potentially counterproductive in discourse management (King et al., 2017). Ideological work is also associated with non-persuasive means, including coordinating sentiments, fostering identity (Perry, 2017), signalling state power (Huang, 2015), agenda setting and attention management (Chan, 2007), especially distracting from controversial discussions (King et al., 2017), and so on. These literatures remind us to examine both persuasive and non-persuasive parts of ideology, focusing on not only beliefs but also perceptual, emotional, and behavioural aspects, especially under the background of re-ideologisation, which scholars have observed since Hu's time, and reached an even higher level under Xi (Holbig, 2009, 2018).

The positive energy discourse borrows many aspects from this repertoire of ideological works. One important aspect, for example, concerns emotional manipulation, which has been common since Mao, and played important roles in recent political discourses. The CCP has tried to cultivate both positive (pride, gratitude, and happiness) and negative emotions (rage and grief) to serve different purposes while maintaining a delicate balance (Kong, 2014). The work on emotion transformed into an emphasis on "positive propaganda" (正面宣传, *zhengmian xuanchuan*). In the 1980s, many party leaders saw the foremost task of propaganda as to revive the public morale, which had been frustrated by the Cultural Revolution. Propaganda expert and Politburo member Hu Qiaomu, for example, said during the anti-spiritual pollution campaign that "the important thing is that readers must feel inspired to work for socialism after reading (newspapers), instead of getting more doubtful and frustrated" (Deng et al., 2015: 703–704). Positive propaganda was intensified after 1989 and the term appeared frequently in official documents (Chan, 2007: 553). Based on a dialectical understanding of difficulties and struggles, its positivity was highly contextual, relying on selective reporting of spectacular political events to inspire faith and affection (Brady, 2002; Stockmann and Gallagher, 2011).

In addition to the continuities, the positive energy phenomenon, compared with such conventional approaches as "positive propaganda," also raises new questions unanswered by previous works. The discourse is tailored for a booming cyberspace that the state has longed to conquer. This new context adds its own flavours to the cultural repertoire, and urges the state to make adjustments in its cultural governance. Importantly, positive energy has an unprecedented duality that makes it a powerful discourse in both political discussions and everyday life, involving (curiously) both the politicisation of everyday life and the depoliticisation of political issues, which indeed challenges the conventional understandings of "ideological works."

A number of studies on Chinese propaganda have touched upon positive energy, and have rightly recognised it as part of cohesive ideological works rather than a movement on a whim. Yet they focus mostly on directly persuasive aspects, and on continuities rather than changes. For instance, Creemers (2017) briefly yet insightfully points out that the discourse is based on predefined civility and public morality. He looks at the persuasive (even coercive) side of the discourse, which aims at marginalising counter-narratives: “rather than pointing out what’s wrong in China, online commentators should focus on positive examples and uplifting stories of effort and heroism” (Creemers, 2017: 98). Guo’s (2017: 420) focus group discussions show that the discourse has generated genuine beliefs, and is more than “propaganda as signaling” (Huang, 2015). However, she then continues that the discourse is not dissimilar to the previous “harmonious society” slogan in the Hu era. Roberts (2018: 212), seeing the nuances and novelties within the discourse, attributes positive energy to distraction: “instead of trying to counter negative criticism,” the state “reorients the public to the positive.” However, she focuses on the control over public discourses, rather than the participatory and/or depoliticised aspect of positive energy.

Some recent works have centred on positive energy. A study by Yang and Tang (2018), through the lens of critical theories, also see in this discourse the state’s growing proactiveness in online propaganda. Yet they similarly focus exclusively on the state’s top-down persuasiveness in the cyberspace. An insightful research by Hird takes a different approach, arguing that positive energy is a “neoliberal” positive psychology that makes individuals responsible for their own emotions and thus “relieves governments and businesses of responsibility for workers’ unhappiness” (Hird, 2018: 125). A deep examination of what positive energy signifies and of its role in class construction, the account views the party-state more as a background than an actor, and does not emphasise how the state actively and strategically constructs and uses the discourse, and how it evolves from previous discourses. While these researches lend important insights about positive energy, they inspire more questions. As Hird (2018: 125) said, “much research remains to be done on *zheng nengliang*.” An important question is how to posit positive energy in the tradition of China’s ideological works. Especially, its distinctive non-persuasive aspects, including its participatory demands, skilful manipulation of emotions, and penetration into popular culture and everyday life, deserve more exploration. On the existing works’ bases, we extend our sight to these previously understudied areas, especially through two important pairs of comparison, namely, between “positive energy” and previous propaganda, and between its official usage in propaganda and popular usage in public discussions.

Methods and Theoretical Framework

Long-time online ethnography, comparative case studies, and Foucauldian discourse analysis are important in this work about the positive energy discourse. The online ethnographic method builds on both Yang’s (2009) “guerrilla ethnography” of moving between different networks, and Han’s (2018) immersive approach on selected platforms. First, we closely follow official media such as CCTV, *People’s Daily*, *People’s Daily*

Online, *Global Times*, Xinhua News Agency, and the Communist Youth League, which are important in both their official status and their active presence on Weibo, one of the largest social media platforms in China. While official outlets are important sources of studying the official tone of positive energy, their Weibo accounts have a higher level of interaction with non-official discourses, and reflect the mutual influence between official media and the netizens. Meanwhile of observing official accounts, we also do extensive observation of netizens' public expressions about positive energy. Instead of following specific netizens' accounts, which is likely to cause bias, we focus on related topics and hashtags, and observe a broad range of participants. During the observation, we also review their profiles to ensure they are not professional astroturfers for the state. The influence of astroturfing is minimised in this study also because it usually happens under posts related to overtly political contents rather than in discussions of everyday life (King et al., 2017). Starting from 2016, we have been conducting ongoing observations of the discussions of positive energy on Weibo by (at least) monthly tracking new posts, and comparing them with official documents and reports. To trace the origin of the discourse before then, we also consult online archives. The cases selected in the article either happened at crucial time points or received high level of public attention, or both.

As Repnikova and Fang (2019) argued, interactiveness has been important in the new propaganda strategies. Therefore, instead of reading the texts separately, we examine the interactions between netizens and state media accounts, including reposts, comments, and similar contents in different posts, especially how the discourse connects private life-related posts with political life. This emphasis on social relation in online ethnography is consistent with Foucauldian discourse analysis methods, which focus on the contexts, logics, and effects of the discourse rather than separate texts (Foucault, 1977a; Jones, 1999; Wedeen, 1999: 18–24). Moreover, through comparing different contexts and effects of various ideological discourses, we also think about whether and why the new discourse serves the state's interests better than previous propaganda strategies.

We adopt Foucault's theory of power and discipline as the analytical framework. As Foucault illustrates in the panopticon model, power is not necessarily hierarchical or centralised. The more important form of power is dispersive, immersive, and systemic, which is more easily internalised by subjects. Ideology serves as an important agent of the dispersive power structure, although Foucault sometimes refrained from using the exact word of "ideology," because it is commonly understood as a top-down technique of forcefully imbuing specific ideas. Instead of this conventional understanding, the Foucauldian theories require us to rethink ideology from a broader perspective, as ideological discourse not only concerns thoughts and persuasion sent down from above, but is also an institution of discipline systemically focusing on speech and actions. For example, school – ideological apparatus of the state – not only conveys fabricated knowledge, but also disciplines students and shapes docile subjectivities. Furthermore, by manipulating ideology, power constructs norms and standards, and structures not only political actions but everyday practices, and while such construction and structuralisation can be manipulated by centralised power, it must go through complicated and diverse societal networks. Indeed, as Foucault noted, one important feature of modern power is that the increasing capacity of modern states to regulate subjects largely comes from self-

regulation that subjects impose on themselves (Foucault, 1977a, 1977b). Therefore, the Foucauldian methodology also stresses treating literary and non-literary texts inseparably as parts of a discourse, and studies how they are shaped by, and simultaneously regenerate, power (Veesser, 1989: xi). These themes will recur in the following analysis about ideological works and positive energy, as the positive energy discourse uses dispersive networks of power to discipline mentality in general and shape docile subjectivities of the people, rather than implanting thoughts arbitrarily.

What's in a Word?

As mentioned above, “positive energy” was not invented by the state but appropriated from popular culture. “Positive energy” first entered the modern vocabulary as a scientology-esque term about spiritual healing in the West (Hird, 2018; McGuire and Kantor, 1988: 241). Its early usages showed an Orientalist and syncretic understanding of cosmology and Eastern philosophy of health, claiming that a sort of “positive energy” could be absorbed from the universe into the human biofield through meditation, yoga, and other spiritual practices. Over the years before the Internet era, this idea had been introduced to the Chinese public with some localising changes.

The phrase developed into a public discourse and gained online popularity through a series of events in 2012. First was a hashtag movement on Weibo during the London Olympics, when the organising committee invited ten previously unknown Chinese citizens to the torch relay, who had made unreserved efforts to serve the public good in their ordinary, humble life. On 4 July, many influential Weibo users cheered the torch relay with the hashtags “light up positive energy and explode your microcosm” (#点燃正能量, 引爆小宇宙#, #DianranZhengNengliangYinbaoXiaoYuzhou) and “light up positive energy and good luck cannot be stopped” (#点燃正能量, 运气挡不住#, #DianranZhengNengliangYunqiDangbuzhu). Although the hashtag movement was likely organised by commercial interests to boost the sales of Olympic torch models (all relevant news reports related “positive energy” with selling torch models, e.g. Phoenix New Media, 2012), it attracted a snowballing number of netizens to repost, marking the public debut of the phrase “positive energy” to the wide audience online.

In August, a popular psychology book titled *Positive Energy* became a national bestseller (according to the 2012 bestseller list on Dangdang.com, a major online bookstore, *Positive Energy* ranked eleventh despite published late in the year, Dangdangwang, 2012). The original English version, titled *Rip It Up* and published only one month before, was written by popular psychologist Richard Wiseman and never mentioned “positive energy.” But the publisher (Hunan Literature and Art Press, an experienced bestseller maker) decided to take advantage of the trending positive energy fervour to boost the Chinese version’s popularity. The editing team retitled the book *Positive Energy*, and added concluding remarks at the end of many paragraphs highlighting the coined keyword “positive energy.” They succeeded not only in marketing, but also in taking the discourse a step further in its meanings. The main idea of the book, which would soon spread across public discourses, is that make-beliefs can become self-fulfilling prophecies: you are happy when you act as if you are happy. “People never

smile because they are happy, but rather always feel happy because they are smiling.” (Wiseman, 2012: 10; cf. Hird, 2018).

The popular phrase was appropriated by the state soon afterwards. Xi Jinping himself became the first “official” user when he called on Sino-US relations to “accumulate positive energy” during a meeting with former US president Jimmy Carter (Central Government of PRC, 2012). In June 2013, the phrase first became related to propaganda works, when Liu Yunshan, Politburo Standing Committee member and head of the propaganda system, stated that propaganda needed to “disseminate the positive energy of morality” with the “most beautiful people” and “most beautiful phenomena” (*People’s Daily*, 2013). In previous discourses, “most beautiful people” (最美人物, *zuimei renwu*) commonly referred to those who sacrifice themselves for the greater good. On 30 October 2013, Lu Wei, then head of the Cyberspace Administration Office, set the tone of the positive energy discourse for years to come by making a keynote address at the annual Forum of Chinese Cyber-Media. He urged that “to build the China Dream, we need to inspire positive energy, pass on positive energy, gather positive energy, and keep enhancing the common ideological ground of the Party and the people.” The purpose of “positive energy” is to “dissolve the hostility (戾气 *liqi*) of the society.” Lu’s instruction was followed by a *Xinhua Daily* article (2013), which pointed out the way to build up “positive energy” by citing Richard Wiseman’s book. It argued that actions provide “positive energy,” and positive energy will change your thinking.

Thus, the essence of positive energy was that people should act positively, speak positively, and, presumably as a result, think positively. Per this logic, “positive energy” does not require sacrifice for the greater good, because such sacrifice is actually good for you too. Moreover, the key is to stay positive, even if it concerns only your own attitudes and not the greater good. Therefore, an important difference between positive energy and previous propaganda works is that positive energy not only focuses on political issues, but could be used to frame such everyday nuisances as an old grandfather studying English together with his grandson (@Renminwang, 2018), or a good recipe for making toast (@Huanqiushibao, 2018). On the other hand, netizens spontaneously use the term on social media to refer to anything they find encouraging or pleasant, be it an inspirational quote (@Chuandaoyoujie, 2019), a happy song (@Gaojingselina, 2018), or tasty food (@MISSTangtang, 2019), for example. As captured by a media report, even when propaganda is not directly involved, people usually “associate ‘positive energy’ with an optimistic attitude, an inspiring manner, and a healthy lifestyle” (Huang, 2017).

The Narrative of Suffering and Its Dilemma

For a better understanding of “positive energy,” we need to look back at ideological works of the post-Tiananmen times before Xi. A dominant strategy discussed here is the “narrative of suffering” (苦难叙事, *kunan xushi*), a development discourse emphasising how China struggles to overcome hardship through perseverance, virtue, and self-sacrifice (Schneider and Hwang, 2014). While Deng’s administration had made intermittent efforts to cover up public grief during the reformist 1980s, his successors managed to sublime bitter emotions (Schwarcz, 1996). Yet continuity clearly existed

between the 1980s and the 1990s, as the narrative of suffering also emphasised positive reporting and shared the difficulty-struggle dialectics. Jiang Zemin's administration found natural disasters especially helpful to unite the people and submit them to a "protecting state." In the famous flood-resistance (抗洪, *kanghong*) campaigns of 1991 and 1998, by highlighting unreserved sacrifices of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers and bitter struggles of the people, the state managed to change the PLA's stigmatic image left by Tiananmen and create patriotic sentiment in the society (Brady, 2002: 569). In 1997, the "narrative of suffering" was also heavily adopted to comfort laid-off workers. By framing their suffering as "sharing difficulties" (分享艰难, *fenxiang jiannan*) with the state, this narrative justified the mass lay-offs and dissolved the pain.

This narrative was used even more systematically and significantly in the Hu era, when the display of suffering was made an annual ceremony. Since 2003, CCTV has developed a programme named "Touching China" (感动中国, *gandong Zhongguo*) as an annual national event and important propaganda project. During its heyday, citizens were organised to watch it and students were required to write essays in a "Touching China" style. Every year, ten people were honoured as the "people who touched China." The honourees included not only national celebrities like Yao Ming and Yang Liwei, but more importantly, previously unknown people who had overcome difficulties, endured suffering, or made sacrifices to pursue the greater good. The ten honourees in 2003, for instance, included a deceased mid-level cadre who had damaged his own health to serve the local people, a grassroots cadre who had spent all his savings and sacrificed several lives in his village to build a mountain road, an activist who had given up her own career to represent the victims of World War II Japanese biological weapons in suing the Japanese government, a police officer in Xinjiang killed by a suicide bomber, and a coal mine manager who risked his life to rescue others in a deadly accident. In a nutshell, a large proportion of the "Touching China" honourees were either dead or severely injured. Their suffering was revealed to the audience, in Foucault's words, as they were illuminated (purposely yet randomly) by "a beam of light coming from the power, which marked them by a blow of its claws" (Foucault, 1979: 80).

The narrative encouraged people to endure suffering and believe that it would pay back in the greater good of national development. Thus, it diverted discontent and converted crises into propaganda opportunities (Schneider and Hwang, 2014). Still in "Touching China" 2003, a special reward was given to the 720,000 displaced residents of the Three Gorges region, who had been forced to abandon their home due to the Three Gorges Dam construction. CCTV framed the forced displacement as following: "In the Chinese culture, for thousands of years, it is hard to move away from home. Yet these people moved out of their hometown to pave the way for the state and the nation." The special award was given for their spirit to "sacrifice their small home for the greater home (the country)" (舍小家为大家, *she xiaojia wei dajia*, CCTV, 2008). The epitome of "narrative of suffering" came in 2008, during the Sichuan earthquake, when Premier Wen Jiabao raised the slogan "Sufferings revive the nation" (多难兴邦, *duonan xingbang*). The earthquake, as well as other sufferings, shares a structural role with the historical narrative of "national humiliation" that dominates China's historiography (Brady, 2002: 569) – although the constructed enemy were fateful sufferings whose

causes are either attributed to nature or left unexplained by the propaganda. Similar to the “national humiliations,” these ambiguously sourced sufferings were used to provoke a sense of national solidarity and urged citizens to “share difficulties.”

Behind the “narrative of suffering” in particular and the manipulation of emotion in general was a society in unrest. Accelerating economic development caused increasing inequality and dissatisfaction (Yang, 2006), and a low level of happiness (Brockmann et al., 2009). One way to address dissatisfaction was recognising the suffering and making people believe that their sacrifice was paid back in national development. This discourse served as a safety valve to mobilise emotions and vent out negative thoughts about individual suffering in a rapidly and unequally developing country.

Yet the safety valve was not completely safe. As noted by Schwarcz (1996), in China’s long tradition to use personal suffering and sorrow in public expression, sorrow could easily be converted to rancour, grudge, and even a mobilising power (as in the 1980s). Although performed in an emotional manner, the essence of the “narrative of suffering” was actually persuasion, as it focused on the reinterpretation of political events along the line of the mainstream propaganda, rather than resolving negative emotions and producing positive ones. However, ideology is a multidimensional concept which means far more than instilling propaganda contents. As noted by Gramsci (1971: 445–462), Foucault (1977a), Althusser (2006), and many others, successful ideological works usually conceal its true purposes, orchestrate systematically produced common sense, and imperceptibly domesticate people’s mind to control the generation of new thoughts. It is through the subtle disciplinary techniques, like Foucault’s panopticon, that the generation of thoughts is controlled. In this light, the intention of using the “narrative of suffering” was explicit, when propaganda always came after crisis and displayed itself as a ceremonial event, a spectacle distanced from everyday life. Instead of trying to control the generation of negative feelings, it risks amplifying them and thus redirecting the anger towards the state itself.

With people’s minds remaining undocile, querulous, and generally negative, the emphasis on suffering might be subverted by dissidents unhappy with China’s authoritarian regime, nationalists unsatisfied with China’s perceived softness abroad, or even ordinary people who grew increasingly sceptical about the official versions of stories. These societal voices could blame the suffering on the state itself, resulting in a moral dilemma with repercussions for legitimacy (Xu, 2016). For example, as sarcastic parodies of the “Touching China” programme, a list of ten honourees that “dares to touch China” (敢动中国, *gandong Zhongguo*) and another of those “China dared to touch” (中国敢动, *Zhongguo gandong*) went viral on the Chinese Internet in 2013. Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, the United States, and so on were on the first list, indicating the nationalist discontent about China’s grand strategy. The second list concerned domestic scandals, including people such as immigrant workers, street vendors, human right lawyers, NGOs, and Bo Xilai.

Such problem was hardly a surprise to the CCP, and as before, the propaganda attempted to maintain the balance. For instance, despite their early utilisation of “dramas of bitter emotions” (苦情戏, *kuqing xi*) as a safety valve for laid-off workers to vent their dissatisfaction the CCP recognised them as a potential source of instability

and publicly stated that such works should be discouraged. Instead, in Hu's time, guidelines of the entertainment industry shifted towards encouraging "the reflection of bright side of society" (Kong, 2014: 55; Miao, 2010: 98).

The most prominent project of this kind was the "harmonious society," which started as a political slogan which aimed at curbing inequality and stabilising the society. Like the "narrative of suffering," it also signified the state's willingness to recognise the dissatisfaction caused by "serious conflicts and problems" such as "unequal economic and social developments between the rural and urban areas and between regions" and the "increased pressure of population, resources, and the environment" (CCP Central Committee, 2006). Yet it took a different approach, combining diffusing positive contents with censoring complaining speeches (Nordin, 2014). Despite heavy investment, the outcome of "harmony" turned out inharmonious. Chinese netizens subverted the discourse with the famous homonymic joke that transformed "harmony" (和谐, *hexie*) into "river crabs" (河蟹, *hexie*). This parody represented a popular political satire culture called *egao* (恶搞), which caused the propaganda organs much trouble and "led to considerable excitement in the academic community" (Nordin and Richaud, 2014: 49).

This is not to say that China could not regulate public discourses. The PRC has always had a set of regulations for the media, which for decades had exerted effective control. Yet with the emergence of the Internet, the conventional repertoire revealed its limits. Cyber-governance in the Hu era was relatively loose and the cyber-sphere seemingly had a potential of becoming a public sphere relatively free of state control. However, as many scholars mentioned, this relative openness does not indicate that the Internet is inherently a "liberation technology" (Diamond, 2010; MacKinnon, 2011). Instead, it was because that the state was yet searching for strategies that could effectively regulate the cyberspace.

What makes the Internet difficult to regulate? Drawing from Zuckerman's (2013) "cute cat theory," we argue that the reason for the state's incapability to regulate the cyberspace, in addition to the anonymity and low threshold of participation, is the extreme diversity of online contents, which are usually not explicitly related to politics. The Internet, as it becomes an increasingly important part of everyday life, is filled with entertaining contents such as popular music, feline videos, games, and fan-talks. These seemingly apolitical contents cannot be easily censored, but sometimes carry subtle political messages to be used in symbolic confrontations. The Hu administration, despite efforts to censor explicitly political contents, had insufficient control over the "apolitical" contents, allowing the Internet to become a platform for what Scott (1985) called "everyday forms of resistance." Political satires in the shape of entertainment were widely popular among the netizens as a subtle yet important way to express discontent (Esarey and Qiang, 2008; Han, 2018: 47–49, 84–90). To abuse Scott's (1998: 11–22) metaphor of foresting, the Internet, as a new sphere of information exchange, was full of weeds and strangely shaped bushes that were previously unknown to the state forester.

To regulate these contents, the state should first make them politically legible – both to itself so that it can make analysis and judgements; and to its subjects, so that they know what they should and should not do. One simple way to provide legibility is to use

what Foucault called the “order of discourse” (*l'ordre du discours*, Foucault, 1972), which can distinguish, compartmentalise, and hierarchise these new species, and provide a clear grammatic structure for them. The “positive energy” discourse is the very strategy to take on this new task: using the “order of discourse” to regulate people’s “apolitical” everyday cyber-behaviours and provide legibility for them.

The Mechanisms of Positive Energy

Manipulating Emotions

One most obvious characteristic that distinguishes “positive energy” from the “narrative of suffering” is their emotional propensities. Instead of reinterpreting negative emotions, the “positive energy” strategy targets the generation of emotions, which shares a common root with “harmonious society” but pushes emotional manipulation one step further. The change from the previous discourse is observable over time. When Liu Yunshan associated “positive energy” with the “most beautiful people,” suffering and sacrifice were still at its core, and the new slogan was not radically different from the old one. Since then, however, the emotional undertone has gone beyond the “pessoptimism” in the previous discourse (Callahan, 2009). In Lu Wei’s speech, the change in political connotation was clear: instead of sacrifice, the discourse now stresses unconditional happiness.

Importantly, personal-level positivity is stressed independent of political events. As mentioned, people do not have to make painful sacrifices or remarkable contributions to gain “positive energy.” Official media often report “positive energy” cases only because they show positive attitudes, even if the attitudes concern no one but themselves. If one is praised for indeed having made some “sacrifice,” such as when an old working-class man makes large donations to charity (Ba, 2017), it is not framed as a “sacrifice,” because through such donations he is supposed to gain positive energy for himself. The greater good is his good, too.

Moreover, the discursive strategy of “positive energy” extends far beyond the phrase *per se*. Following the guideline of positivity, the state has launched many projects and campaigns to develop a culture of “positive energy.” Typical propaganda slogans include “China is awesome” (中国很赞, *Zhongguo henzan*), “the new era is awesome” (赞赞新时代, *zanzan xinshidai*), and so on. Accordingly, the general tone of official media has become increasingly positive, with popular slangs, inspirational quotes, and exclamations added consciously to news reports, be they related to entertainment, everyday life, or state/international politics.

At the same time, positive energy and the increasing positivity in the media do not make the narrative of suffering obsolete. Despite losing its appeal in the Internet age, especially after 2008 (Xu, 2016), the narrative of suffering covers important aspects of propaganda irreplaceable by the feel-good positive energy. Especially when people experience tangible hardships, positive energy’s neoliberal self-help solution means evading rather than facing the problem, whereas the narrative of suffering vents dissatisfaction more directly. With an economic slowdown vaguely looming ahead, such

“suffering” slogans as “overcoming difficulties together (with the country)” (共克时艰, *gongke shijian*) re-emerge in propaganda to convey the idea that Chinese people do not fear and can endure bad times (Tao, 2018). However, the suffering narrative also evolves across time, aiming more at creating rally-around-the-flag effects domestically and reflecting muscles internationally than performing morality as the compassionate paternal state (Xu, 2016). The undertone of suffering in the positive energy era is thus coherent with the positivity, and *gongke shijian* comfortably coexists with *Zhongguo henzan*.

Participating in Popular Culture

In addition to emotional manipulation, the positive energy discourse’s strong relation to popular culture also indicates its dispersive and immersive nature, a stark contrast to previous ideological works. Unlike predecessors that wielded external power from above, the new strategy demands that propaganda should participate in popular culture as at once a player, a producer, and a regulator of cyber-culture, which serves two intertwining goals: fostering spontaneous participation and “set the tone” for cyber-discourses (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2018).

The strategy requires not only adopting popular slangs, memes, and entertainment forms, but also constant production and reproduction of popular culture, as illustrated by a case during the 2018 annual National People’s Congress (NPC). During the NPC, the Weibo account of *People’s Daily* uploaded a finger tutting music video themed “China is awesome” (中国很赞, *Zhongguo henzan*), and joyfully invited pop stars and ordinary netizens to perform the “finger tutting challenge” and share the video on Weibo. Netizens responded enthusiastically, especially fans who appeared more than happy to see their idols on the video. Campaigns as such were said to spread positive energy, and the pop stars were called “positive energy idols” by both official media and netizens. *People’s Daily* reported that within twelve days, the finger tutting had already received more than one billion clicks, reposts and video participations (*People’s Daily*, 2018).

Fandom culture serves as a depoliticising disguise, efficiently penetrating the society, mobilising participation, and shaping public discourses. First, “finger tutting” took advantage of the “challenge” frenzy which had spread across social media worldwide and proved effective in motivating participation (Kilgo et al., 2017). Moreover, instead of forcefully pouring down propaganda in a hierarchical order, this challenge penetrates fandom groups, connects directly with fans, diffuses the pro-state sentiments into a cheerful air, and demands mass participation. It requires fans to watch the videos, repost, and comment passionately, record themselves performing the challenge, and share on social media. For instance, the *People’s Daily*’s first promotion Weibo reads:

[...] People’s Daily’s social media account invites you to join the #ChinaIsAwesome# finger tutting challenge, and kick-start the ‘China is Awesome’ MV. Upload your finger tutting video, and give a thumb up for China [...] Your video may be shown in the official MV together with @ZhangYixing, @LiuTao, @LiChen, @ZhangYishan, @WangKai, @Qin-Hailu!, (@Renminribao, 2018)

All the names mentioned were hot youth sensations, who also have their own hashtags calling them “positive energy idols” (e.g. #正能量偶像张艺兴#, #Zheng-NengliangOuxiangZhangYixing#). Fans could repost videos with these hashtags, and the number of reposts contribute directly to the popularity ranking of the star. Participation in the campaign thus becomes a performative ritual for fan groups (a huge and extremely active population) to showcase support and compete for spotlights. “Positive energy” was a certificate for their loveliness and popularity within the fandom culture.

Similar campaigns appear increasingly frequently online, almost all of which receive enthusiastic responses (for examples of important official media using fandom culture and “positive energy idols” as ideological tools, see @Renminwang, 2017; @XinhuaShidian, 2017; @Zhongguoqingnianbao, 2019). Young actors/actresses often join the rank of positive energy idols soon after they rise to fame. The fandom culture must comply to the positive energy discourse if fans want to see their idols, making the discourse overwhelmingly powerful online. The campaigns are fun in nature and generally non-persuasive, and fans may or may not recognise the political meanings behind the veil of fandom passion. However, watching their idols lauding the state and performing the finger tutting with their own bodies, they are likely to internalise the sentiment within the videos (a subtle allusion to the “make-belief” logic that you will think positively if acting so), as indicated by their cheerleading comments about China. The discourse associates the state with joy, not by emphasising how life improves under the CCP, but by connecting the state with their favourite faces to look at. Ideological work in this form seldom targets any specific idea, but instead targets people’s everyday life.

Interwoven with popular culture and masked by a depoliticised language, the positive energy discourse imperceptibly yet fiercely penetrates people’s private spheres, and has a more powerful mobilising effect than conventional propaganda. For example, our data show that in 2018, among all *People’s Daily* Weibo posts hashtagged #QuanguoLianghui# (#全国两会#), those posts that mentioned popular idols have significantly higher numbers of reposts, comments, and likes than those that did not, indicating a higher level of participation in the *lianghui* topic (see Appendix 1 for specific data). While this does not necessarily mean pop stars increase political support, they increase netizens’ exposure to propaganda, and prime netizens with positive images.

Participation works side by side with coercion. Some fans, themselves politically sensitive, fervently relate their idols with the “positive energy” discourse to ensure that their idols conform to the spirit of the state and are not banned. Both a player and the referee in cyber-culture, the state is using both invisible and visible hands. In addition to official media participating in fandom culture, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT, 2018) is also exercising tighter and more specific control over the entertainment industry. Meanwhile of rewarding positive energy idols with more resources, actors with negative characters (劣迹艺人, *lieji yiren*) are banned. As a result, both idols and fans try hard to maintain a positive image. This is particularly observable in multiple talent shows in 2018 and 2019, where potential idols remove smoky make-ups, hide their rebellious attitudes, and emphasise how hard they work to realise their dream, how bright and clear their souls are, and how much they love

the CCP. Though we are still awaiting systematic researches into these new phenomena, watching any TV shows offers a vivid illustration of how popular culture has been thoroughly penetrated, becoming a fresh part of state regulation.

Constructing a Floating Signifier

Beyond entertainment, the indispensability of virtual cultural life makes it possible for the state to target the entire sphere of private life by manipulating cyber-discourses. Positive energy is particularly an effective tool thanks to, ironically, its lack of precise meanings. The definition of positivity is always vague and subject to manipulation. Borrowing from linguistic terms, a phrase serves as a “signifier,” whose signified meanings are fixed in a given semantic field, making it understandable to the audience. However, a phrase like “positive energy” can point to so many different meanings that it becomes a “floating signifier,” a concept first used by Lévi-Strauss, which “represents an undetermined quality of signification, in itself void of meaning and thus apt to receive any meaning” (Lévi-Strauss, 1987: 63–64). The state, therefore, can easily use positive energy to signify any meaning that suits the need for ideological works.

It is not a new trick to play with political “newspeaks” whose meanings are intentionally left unclear. For years, such practices have worked to press for self-censorship (Rawnsley, 2008; Stern and Hassid, 2012). Yet the positive energy discourse has been applied in a much broader context, a large part of which has no direct political relevance. The same phrase can be used to extol the rise of China, economic growth, and military reform, but more often is it used to judge people’s everyday behaviours. Sharing positive energy news and quotes has been a common practice for netizens. For instance, many small-scale e-commerce merchants (微商, *weishang*) use the hashtag #*WeishangZhengnengliangYulu*# (微商正能量语录, e-commerce positive energy quotes, which has over 22,000 posts by August 2019) to cheer themselves up in the harsh capitalist environment and attract potential consumers, as the positive energy contents can humanise the e-merchants by constructing funny, kind, and hard-working self-images. Typically, these positive energy quotes internalise and reproduce the discourse’s “neo-liberal” logic emphasising self-adjustments (e.g. “every success comes from suffering,” @Ningxiaoxiaoxiaojie, 2019), but the floating nature of the discourse also means that they can be easily politicised. Inspirational quotes that combine individualism with national identities such as “if you are bright in yourself, China won’t be dark” (你光明, 中国便不黑暗, *ni guangming, Zhongguo bianbu heian*), while sometimes used to regulate people’s own emotions (e.g. @Muzijingyi, 2016), are also conveniently picked up by netizens to show support for the state, as indicated in mainstream netizens’ reactions against the Hong Kong anti-extradition movement in June–August 2019 (e.g. @M77Xingqiudemangozai, 2019).

Moreover, as “positive energy” can signify anything the state promotes, anything the state tries to avoid can be framed as its opposite. Hence, there is an antagonistic dichotomy between positive energy and what is known by the Chinese public as “negative energy” (负能量, *fu nengliang*). Like its counterpart, “negative energy” also works as a floating signifier, which can include anything the state dislikes, especially

those that cannot be regulated by clear-cut legislation. The following case exemplifies how this dichotomy regulates public discourses. In January 2018, the SAPPRFT announced that TV programmes and online media should not feature people “who have tattoos, who are related with hip-hop culture, sub-cultures (non-mainstream cultures), and the *sang* culture” (culture of despondency, Zhou, 2018). “Sub-cultures” (亚文化, *ya wenhua*) have commonly been perceived as rebellious against the mainstream, tattoos and hip-hop being two representative examples of them. The “*sang* culture” (丧文化, *sang wenhua*) expresses frustration about the hardship of daily life, usually without much potential of collective actions or hostility against the authority. Like “sub-cultures,” however, it is opposite to the positive energy discourse, and its “negative energy” is enough to justify its prohibition.

As the example indicates, “negative energy” is not political opposition. Instead, it reveals the state’s expanding ambition to meddle in the private sphere. If the diverse contents in the “apolitical” sphere were previously illegible to the state, the distinction between “positive” and “negative” energies serves to shape the grammar in the discursive field, structuralising the dazzling diversity, which can then become the target of state management. A good citizen needs to remain positive and avoid negative energy. Moreover, due to the ambiguity of “negative energy,” online media, previously freer of state control than traditional journalism (Hassid and Repnikova, 2016), have to enforce ever-stronger self-censorship to avoid stepping on landmines. Increasingly frequently, “negative energy” sites are rectified. This includes not only news sites such as Fenghuang News (suspended all publications and taken down from the Apple/Android app store for weeks, Phoenix New Media, 2018), but also entertainment sites. The joke site Neihan Duanzi was closed indefinitely for “not conforming to public opinion guidance.” Short video site Douyin, owned by the same company as Neihan Duanzi, started strict self-censorship under pressure, closing its live video and comment sections for weeks, claiming it would “construct a content pool of positive energy” (Sun, 2018).

More importantly, the dichotomy between positive and negative abnormalises negative feelings, which, ironically, had previously been part of the propaganda itself. By structuralising the previously unregulated field of personal emotions, the state not only promotes the feel-good lifestyle, but stigmatises negative emotions like sadness, anger, suspicion, and frustration as harmful for both individuals and the society. As positivity becomes the norm, negative emotions become a psychological problem that needs to be overcome and cured, rather than a normal feeling to be vented out. In one article, the *People’s Daily* even denounced the aforementioned “*sang*” culture as “spiritual opium” (He, 2017). Positive energy plays a similar role to that of psychiatry as described by Foucault: it distinguishes “abnormal” from “normal” behaviours, and imposes guilt on the “abnormal” because they disturb the “normal” functioning of the society (Foucault, 1977a). Abnormality, be it idleness in Foucault’s France or “negative energy” in today’s China, thus is targeted by discipline, albeit not legally banned. With this stigmatisation, the discourse not only prevents people from testing boundaries, but also disciplines the societal mindset by controlling negative emotions. People are trained to be happy for their humble lives and show gratefulness to their parents, community, and probably most importantly, the party-state. They are also told to sideline their negative emotions, and by

implication the potential to act in accordance: attributing problems to the state, protesting, petitioning, even cursing. Not only in youth culture but even among elderly people, as Guo (2017) shows, positive energy prevails and “negative energy” is spontaneously and consciously avoided and opposed. Differently from the times of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, positive energy does not depict a utopian future that requires sacrifice, but tells people that they are living in a utopia, as long as they conform to the “positive” norm.

Therefore, floating and dispersive as the discourse is, the combination of subtle languages and techniques produces a homogenous social order that serves the interests of the ruling class. Just as the Foucauldian discipline contributes to the capitalist society by making docile bodies working restlessly for capitalist production, the positive energy discourse shapes the subjectivities of citizens that target their own “negative” thoughts as an enemy, internalise the interests of the state as their own, and thus not only censor themselves in daily life but willingly so. Positive energy thus illustrates how ideological works today help solve the dictator’s dilemma in a Foucauldian way: not “winning hearts and minds,” but shaping hearts and minds.

Conclusion

As Brady has pointed out, the task of the Xi administration in ideological works is the same as that of Jiang and Hu, namely, gatekeeping the boundary of expression while mobilising public support (Brady, 2017). Indeed, we see much continuity between the current ideological discourses and previous ones. Yet the repertoire of state ideological apparatuses, while being inherited from past practices, also continually renews itself. One important feature of Xi’s ideological work is that it tries to mobilise and control public discourses at the same time, through careful manoeuvres of the inherited repertoire as well as bold innovations and creative uses of it.

The discourse of positive energy is an illustrative case of both continuity and change, and carries important implications on the general direction of ideological works. Scholars have noted the “softening” of Chinese propaganda since the early 2000s, turning from “control” to “management” and “guidance” (Brady, 2017; Yang, 2014b). The repertoire of managing public discourse has evolved dramatically since then. While in earlier times official media on social media participated mostly reactively and interacted very little with netizens (Esarey, 2015; Tong and Lei, 2013), the state has increasingly emphasised proactive participation in public discourses. On the one hand, such proactiveness is indicated by the increased presence and increased persuasiveness of official media on social media; on the other hand, official media have also embraced a more diverse toolset of ideological work that expand beyond persuasion. The positive energy discourse combines emotional manipulation, norm-setting, stigmatisation, and popular culture to work on a different level from mere persuasion. Many of these tools are brought back from the CCP’s cultural governance tradition, and applied to the realm of new media, creating an evolved repertoire of ideological works.

Moreover, while previous works have inspired our study on the CCP’s evolving ideological strategies, we also pay specific attention to an aspect of CCP propaganda that has been previously understudied, namely, the Foucauldian disciplinary use of

discourses. As Foucault reminds us, the most dangerous power is not the sheer power wielded coercively by external forces, but rather the dispersed and intangible power that is easily internalised by its subjects. While the Xi administration is doubtlessly imposing tighter control and more powerful persuasion over public discourses, scholars have also noted that its propaganda is even “softer” than previous ones (Repnikova and Fang, 2018). The new propaganda combines force with subtle, dispersive, and immersive disciplinary techniques, making it both more coercive and more subtly manipulative. The positive energy discourse illustrates this combination. Investigating it under the Foucauldian light, we find that as an institution of discipline, this discourse subtly shapes the subjectivity of citizens, producing docile minds that internalise the interests of the state as their own. Under the framework of positive energy, mobilising participation and setting the limit for expression are not conflicting but mutually facilitating.

However, as Foucault says, “Where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault, 1990: 95). The positive energy discourse, while trying to order discursive power, is not without tension in itself. For one thing, the floating nature of the discourse may actually indicate a void of ideology. The discourse is ready to promote anything the state is interested in, which is a hodgepodge of traditional morals, socialist values, development, nationalism, stability, and so on, possibly with tensions between each other. Moreover, positive energy is not unchallenged. Even though the self-help logic of unconditional positivity has become the norm in public discourses, there are still ridicules of positive energy, especially when facing solid social problems, such as the aforementioned economic slowdown. Notably, the floating nature of the discourse, which gives the state means to manipulate, may also cause problems of credibility. As a joke goes, a political slogan is positive energy on the wall of a government building, but becomes negative energy if someone takes it to the street. This floatingness thus also invites “weapons of the weak” that “wave red flags to oppose the red flag.”

Yet such resistance, as Foucault (1990: 95) continues “is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.” Power indeed invites resistance, but because the modern power structure is dispersive and immersive, every act of resistance can only operate within it. Resistance must utilise the tool it condemns, risking falling prey to the very mechanism it opposes. Power and resistance are not confronting each other in a dichotomous war of position, but feeding each other in a spiral relationship (Foucault, 1990; Veaser, 1989). While potentially challenging official discourses, “weapons of the weak” also feed into the omnipresence of state power (Wedeen, 1999). In the case of China’s cyber-culture, as recent researches have shown, the fragmented resistance of ridicule and satire leads to more cynicism than constructive actions (Shao and Liu, 2019). Yet Foucault still sees the dim hope of overcoming the modern power structure hiding in the practice of seeing through and exposing the power mechanisms. In a way, the mechanisms of positive energy are defined by the potential of resistance. Precisely because “weapons of the weak” become increasingly concerning for ideological state apparatuses, because information becomes increasingly diverse and cultural production increasingly complicated, a centralised power structure will be increasingly outdated for managing a changing field of public discourses, and a dispersive one increasingly

suitable for ideological works. Increasingly, the state is using a combination of subtle techniques to enrich its repertoire of ideological works. In Foucault's words, "The notions of institutions of repression, rejection, exclusion, marginalization, are not adequate to describe, at the very centre of the carceral city, the small acts of cunning, calculated methods, techniques, 'sciences' that permit the fabrication of the disciplinary individual" (Foucault, 1977a: 308).

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Appendix I

We compare the numbers of reposts, comments, and likes of those posts that mentioned popular stars and those that did not, among all Weibo posts by *People’s Daily* containing the hashtag #QuanguoLianghui# during the 2018 *lianghui* period (March 2018). The results are summarised in Tables A1 and A2.

We also collected similar posts (such as the finger tutting videos with cheerleading words) on the stars’ own Weibo pages. Their numbers of reposts, comments, and likes are even larger than those of the *People’s Daily*. Official media accounts are unlikely to delete comments or reposts, as it can (and usually does) use an UI to show its own selected comments (without influencing the numbers), making it unnecessary to invest time deleting. We also tracked the numbers of comments and reposts at different time points between March 2018 and May 2019, and noticed no decrease in the numbers (which mostly stay constant after April 2018). Astroturfing likely happens under some posts, but as mentioned, it is supposed to be more likely under posts related to overtly political debates, implying that between posts that mentioned the pop stars and post that did not, the difference in participation may actually be even greater than it appears here.

Table A1. Summaries of Repost, Comment, and Like Numbers.

	Mentioning pop stars			Not mentioning pop stars		
	Log reposts	Log comments	Log likes	Log reposts	Log comments	Log likes
Mean	8.917	7.763	9.153	6.688	5.608	7.721
median	8.721	7.966	8.961	6.548	5.429	7.512
Max	15.031	10.191	11.038	11.409	10.276	12.612
Min	5.932	4.419	7.220	3.401	0.	4.943
Standard deviation	2.119	1.353	1.080	1.346	1.514	1.236
N	23	23	23	549	549	549

Table A2. Difference between Mentioning and Not Mentioning Pop Stars.

	Log reposts	Log comments	Log likes
Intercept	6.68773 (113.217)***	5.60777 (87.110)***	7.72100 (146.981)***
Popular idol	2.22944 (7.568)***	2.15547 (6.714)***	1.43229 (5.467)***
R2	0.09131	0.07329	0.04983
Adjusted R2	0.08972	0.07166	0.04816

Note: The numbers in parentheses are t-ratios based on robust standard errors.

*Significant at 10% level.

**Significant at 5% level.

***Significance at 1% level.