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Authoritarian Participatory Persuasion 2.0: Netizens as Thought Work Collaborators in China

Maria Repnikova[a] and Kecheng Fang[b]

[a]Georgia State University, USA; [b]University Of Pennsylvania, USA

ABSTRACT

In the reform era, management of information by the Chinese Communist Party has been continuously moving away from explicit, crude tactics of the past toward more subtle and orderly mechanisms of the present. This study examines one facet of this transformation in the online sphere: digital persuasion. Drawing on three emerging trends in online persuasion, including official digital revamping of state media, expansion of government Weibo, and official promotion of patriotic bloggers, the authors explain how online persuasion is taking on an increasingly participatory form under President Xi. Specifically, the conceptualization of 'authoritarian participatory persuasion 2.0' includes direct co-production of persuasion, with netizens called to repost, share and create content, as well as the indirect participation, whereby netizens are invited to partake in the life of the top leader, Xi Jinping, and to consume exclusive practical tips provided by the state. The participatory digital persuasion, whereas intended to facilitate public complicity with the regime, has also opened up spaces for satire and 'incivility' unmasking and challenging the state's covert propaganda practices.

Civilizing Information Management

In the past several decades, public opinion and information management by the Chinese party-state has evolved into a more civil or civilized process.[1] The official approach has shifted from overt, crude methods of the Mao era to more subtle, modern tactics, often endorsed in the name of civility and progress, yet still exercised to reassert the hegemony of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s rule. In contrast to the Mao era 'on-the-spot' social investigation, for instance, in the reform period, the CCP has resorted to large-scale random surveying and polling as a way to both garner public preferences, and to root its policies in 'scientific'[2] evidence of widespread public support.[3] Surveillance has become

routinized in the name of responsive and effective policy-making, with authorities stressing the importance of civil deliberation[4] and attentiveness to public concerns.[5] Censorship or information control has also transformed from ideologically driven, all-encompassing restrictions[6] to regulations veiled as legal[7] and informal pronouncements.[8] Finally, scholars of China's propaganda apparatus argue that 'rather than violent means of the past, the party-state's legitimacy is now carefully manufactured (and monitored) through assiduous political public relations, polling and entertainment, amongst other modern forms of mass persuasion'.[9]

Most recently, the expansion of the Internet has brought new challenges and opportunities for the party's efforts to mask information control with subtle tools and objectives. On the one hand, the Internet has facilitated new forms of potentially subversive public expression. New social media platforms, such as Twitter-like Weibo and WeChat (also known as Weixin), for instance, have empowered savvy netizens to redefine, and in some cases to overtly challenge the official ideology.[10] Scholars have documented netizens' use of satire,[11] public shaming mechanisms or 'human flash search engines',[12] and online organizing and activism[13] as ways to push back on, as well as to pressure the state at the local and central levels.

Other than exacerbating bottom-up pressure on the Chinese state, the Internet has also presented the regime with new opportunities for innovative information management and public opinion guidance. Most studies on this subject focus on the evolution of censorship, pointing to its selective[14] and decentralized[15] features. Some also analyze the regulatory frameworks, arguing that the overall digital management of public opinion has become more centralized under Xi.[16] The less examined, but an equally important facet of official adaptation to the Internet challenge, however, is that of the party-state's use of new digital platforms for sharpening its persuasive capacities. The few works that systematically address this development suggest that an online propaganda system might be in the making. The studies of paid online commentators, or the '50-cent army', for instance, uncovered the state's extensive efforts to delude negative content with that favorable to the regime, often carrying

[3]Patricia M. Thornton, 'Retrofitting the steel frame: From mobilizing the masses to surveying the public', in Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry, eds., *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011), pp. 237–268.

[4]Baoguang He and M. E. Warren, 'Authoritarian deliberation: The deliberative turn in Chinese political development', *Perspectives on Politics* 9(02), (2011), pp. 269–289.

[5]Robert P. Weller, 'Responsive authoritarianism and blind-eye governance in China', in Nina Bandelj and Dorothy J. Solinger, eds., *Socialism Vanished, Socialism Challenged: Eastern Europe and China, 1989–2009* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 83–100.

[6]Mao era media control is a manifestation of information management in totalitarian systems, which features more uniformity of political discourse, deployment of violence and explicit top-down directives in contrast to somewhat more flexible information control under authoritarian rule. On differences between totalitarian and authoritarian media systems, see: Jonathan Becker, 'Lessons from Russia: A neo-authoritarian media system', *European Journal of Communication* 19(2), (2004), pp. 139–163.

[7]Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

[8]Maria Repnikova, *Media Politics in China: Improvising Power Under Authoritarianism* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[9]Ashley Esarey, Daniela Stockmann, and Jie Zhang, 'Support for Propaganda: Chinese perceptions of public service advertising', *Journal of Contemporary China* 26(103), (2017), pp. 101–117; Anne-Marie Brady and J. Wang, 'China's strengthened new order and the role of propaganda', *Journal of Contemporary China* 18(62), (2009), pp. 767–788.

[10]Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

[11]Guobin Yang and Min Jiang, 'The networked practice of online political satire in China: Between ritual and resistance', *International Communication Gazette* 77(3), (2015), pp. 215–231.

[12]Rebecca Ong, 'Online vigilante justice Chinese style and privacy in China', *Information & Communications Technology Law* 21(2), (2012), pp. 127–145.

[13]Jon Sullivan and L. Xie, 'Environmental activism, social networks and the internet', *The China Quarterly* 198, (2009), pp. 422–432; Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*.

[14]Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Molly E. Roberts, 'How censorship in China allows government criticism but silences collective expression', *American Political Science Review* 107(02), (2013), pp. 326–343.

[15]Sheena C. Greitens, 'Authoritarianism online: What can we learn from internet data in non-democracies?' *PS: Political Science & Politics* 46(02), (2013),pp. 262–270; Rebecca MacKinnon, 'China's "networked authoritarianism"', *Journal of Democracy* 22(2), (2011), pp. 32–46.

[16]Rogier Creemers, 'Cyber China: Upgrading propaganda, public opinion work and social management for the twenty-first century', *Journal of Contemporary China* 26(103), (2017), pp. 85–100.

a nationalistic fervor,[17] and aiming to distract the public.[18] Other works examine the creation of the official Weibo accounts,[19] aimed at further fostering a more legitimate vision of the party.

Studies on the party's digital persuasion published in Chinese academic journals take a more pragmatic approach, suggesting that the state should interact with audiences rather than lecture them, produce viral content, and shorten the distance between state propaganda and ordinary people, among other strategies.[20]

This article contributes to these studies on digital propaganda as well as the wider scholarship on the shifts in information control in direction of imposed civility[21] by engaging with the latest 'upgrades' in official digital persuasion practices under Xi Jinping's rule, from late 2012 to late 2015. By persuasion practices the authors are primarily interested in state-led communication designed to persuade,[22] as opposed to the effects or the actual influence of these messages on public opinion formation, which is how persuasion is often understood and analyzed by political communication scholars.[23] This article finds that an important upgrade in state's digital propaganda is its increasingly participatory nature or what the authors define as 'authoritarian participatory persuasion 2.0', whereby the targets of propaganda are made into active collaborators in the process of recreating pro-party discourses online, and civility discourse often marks and unifies the different dimensions of this participation. The article proceeds in discussing the latest persuasion tactics under Xi, followed by the introduction of the concept of participatory persuasion, and the analysis of its different manifestations.

Data and Methods

Locating the New Trends

In order to observe and collect data about the new practices of state persuasion under Xi, the authors first identified the important emerging trends in the party's digital persuasion, as well as representative platforms and accounts that are associated with each trend. In identifying the trends and platforms, the authors consulted numerous news stories and policy reports about Chinese media, including the reports produced by the Freedom House, CPJ, and China Media Project, as well as about 20 informants who are experienced journalists in China, officials working in propaganda departments, or scholars of Chinese media.[24]

Trend 1: Digital Revamping of Official News Outlets

This first key trend appears to represent a centralized initiative aimed at effectively converging the development of traditional and new media, as publicized in the party document released at the 4th meeting of the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform (a new governing body

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[17]Rongbin Han, 'Manufacturing consent in cyberspace: China's "fifty-cent army"', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 44(2), (2015), pp. 105–134.

[18]Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, 'How Chinese government fabricates social media posts for strategic distraction, not engaged argument', *American Political Science Review* 111(3), (2017), pp. 484–501.

[19]Jesper Schlæger and Min Jiang, 'Official microblogging and social management by local governments in China', *China Information* 28 (2), (2014), pp. 189–213.

[20]Taofu Zhang, 'Wangluo Yulun Shengtai de Zhili Celue [Strategies to govern online public opinion]', *News and Writing* 7, (2016), pp. 22–25; Changfeng Chen, 'Zunxun Yulun Guilv, Yindao Yulun Fangxiang [Follow the rules of public opinion and guide its direction]', *News and Writing* 5, (2016), p. 1; Guoming Yu, 'Guanyu Wangluo Yulunchang Gongjice Gaige de Jidian Sikao [Some thoughts on reforming the supply side of online public opinion]', *News and Writing*, 5, (2016), pp. 43–45.

[21]By imposed civility we mean control either featuring more civil methods or being fostered in the name of civility.

[22]In her analysis of CCP's propaganda strategies, Brady adapts a similar definition of persuasion. See: Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China*.

[23]Shanto Iyengar and Jennifer McGrady, 'Mass Media and Political Persuasion,' pp. 224–249.

[24]The authors met with informants during the summers of 2015 and 2016 in China. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, the authors are unable to provide the names of our informants. They include employees of the following outlets: *The People's Daily*, *CCTV News*, *China Youth Daily*, The Paper, Jiemian, Shanghai Observer, *Southern Weekly*, *Southern Metropolis Daily*, and *The Beijing News*.

created and headed by Xi).[25] In practice this ambition entails a creation of new online only official outlets, as well as an expansion of official media outreach via public social media accounts.

As for the former, *The Paper* (澎湃, also known as *Pengpai*), a Shanghai-based news outlet, launched on 22 July 2014, is the prime example and the pioneer in the state's movement of creating online only official media. Although its interface and content appears to mimic that of commercialized outlets, *The Paper* is a state-funded digital media project (with an initial funding of at least ￥300 million, or $48 million) that serves as an important platform for mass persuasion, or to use the party's words, for occupying public opinion fields (*zhanling yulun zhendi*) in the digital environment.[26] The success of *The Paper* has inspired similar initiatives in Shanghai and cross-regionally.[27]

In addition to establishing new digital outlets, the party has also fortified the existing traditional party media, including the central level 'big three' (CCTV, *The People's Daily* and *Xinhua News Agency*), as well as provincial and municipal-level outlets. Since 2013, top party media have enjoyed the highest influence rankings on Weibo (Table 1) and WeChat (Table 2).[28] According to newrank.cn, a leading social media analytics company in China,[29] *CCTV News* and *The People's Daily* have been the two most popular public WeChat accounts, measured by the amount of followers, views, shares, and likes. In April 2017 alone, *The People's Daily* WeChat account published 479 articles, got more than 47.9 million views and more than 3.22 million likes, with *CCTV News* not lagging too far behind. As a comparison, the most popular WeChat account of commercial newspapers (*Metro Express*) only got 14.3 million views and 54.2 thousand likes.[30]

In analyzing the official reinvention of state digital news outlets, the authors observed *Pengpai,* as well as selected Weibo and WeChat accounts of *CCTV News* and *The People's Daily*, as they constitute the most influential accounts based on the number of followers and public engagement in these platforms (number of likes, comments, and shares). In addition, the authors also observed selected niche social media accounts affiliated with *The People's Daily*, including Xiake Dao (侠客岛), which provides political analysis, as well as Xuexi Xiaozu (学习小组) and Xuexi Daguo (学习大国), which focus on Xi Jinping (see Table 3). These niche accounts, featuring more narrowly focused content and targeted audience, represent the other type of social media accounts launched by official media. The authors selected these three specific accounts because they are the most influential niche accounts based on the number of followers and public engagement, and they are affiliated with the central party mouthpiece.

Trend 2: The Wide Expansion of Government Weibo and WeChat accounts

The second prominent trend is the intensification of e-governance through the official expansion of social media accounts aimed at transpiring interaction with the public. By the end of 2014, there were about 277 thousand government Weibo accounts and more than 17 thousand government WeChat accounts.[31] These accounts are run by various government and party units, such as public security agencies, courts, local party committees and propaganda offices, Communist Youth League (CYL)

[25]Wubin Wang, 'Will convergence help traditional media?', *China Daily*, (29 August 2014), available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2014-08/29/content_18508215.htm (accessed 1 July 2016).

[26]Tabitha Speelman, 'Looking for smarter, sexier Chinese state media? There's an app for that', *Foreign Policy*, (15 December 2015), available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/12/15/smarter-sexier-chinese-state-media-pengpai-paper/ (accessed 10 July 2016).

[27]Since the *Pengpai* launch, fourteen other similar initiatives emerged across China.

[28]The rise of party media on Weibo and WeChat can be explained by top-down encouragement, more human resource investment, and more diverse content and skillful strategies. See Kecheng Fang, 'Shejiao Meiti Shidai Dangmei Chong Duo Maikefeng Xianxiang Fenxi [Investigating Party Media's Resurgence on Social Media]' for more details.

[29]Zhengguang Luo, 'Xu Danei: Zuo Xinmeiti Lingyu De 'fubusi', Xiang Guo [Xu Danei: I've Considered to Found the Forbes in the New Media Realm]', *Xinhua News Agency*, (23 September 2014), available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2014-09/23/c_1112596457.htm (accessed 15 October 2016).

[30]'Weixin gonghao paihang [Rankings for WeChat public accounts]', *Newrank*, (n.d.), available at: http://newrank.cn/public/info/list.html?period=month&type=data### (accessed 2 May 2017).

[31]Yahui Wang, 'Woguo Zhengwu Weixin Gongzhonghao Shuliang Yi Chao 1.7 Wan [There Are More than 17 Thousand Government WeChat Accounts in Our Country]', *China Youth Net*, (28 September 2015), available at: http://news.youth.cn/gn/201509/t20150928_7163577.htm. The government Weibo has been expanding due to the central government's active endorsements, requiring governments on all levels to 'increase the percentage of government organs that have set up social media accounts' and to 'fully taking advantage of the interactivity of social media'. See http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2016-08/12/content_5099138.htm.

Table 1. Top 20 popular media Weibo accounts from 2012 to 2016.

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
1	Caijing.com.cn	The People's Daily	The People's Daily	The People's Daily	The People's Daily
2	Southern Metropolis Daily	CCTV News	CCTV News	CCTV News	CCTV News
3	New Weekly	Caijing.com.cn	Global Times	Xinhua Shidian	Xinhua Shidian
4	Shanghai Morning Post	Shanghai Morning Post	Legal Evening News	People's Liberation Army Daily	People's Liberation Army Daily
5	The People's Daily	Southern Metropolis Daily	China Newsweek	Voice of China	China Daily
6	The Founder	New Weekly	People's Daily online	People's Daily online	Guangming Daily Online
7	China Newsweek	Guangzhou Daily	Caijing.com.cn	Chengdu Business Daily	Liao Wang
8	Mina	China Newsweek	Rage Comics	China Daily	Global Times
9	Phoenix TV	The Founder	Vista	West China Metropolis Daily	Voice of China
10	Vista	Mina	Shanghai Morning Post	Global Times	Xinhua Net
11	Life Week	People's Daily online	Southern Metropolis Daily		
12	China Entrepreneur	Nanfang Daily	Henan Daily		
13	Yangtse Evening Post	Vista	Mop.com		
14	Guangzhou Daily	Phoenix TV	Caixin.com		
15	Southern Metropolis Weekly	Global Times	Yangtse Evening Post		
16	Wall Street Journal Chinese	Yangtse Evening Post	CCTV Financial Market		
17	Southern People Weekly	Life Week	National Business Daily		
18	Nanfang Daily	The Beijing News	Guokr.com		
19	Southern Weekly	National Business Daily	Chengdu Business Daily		
20	EE-Media	CCTV Finance & Economy	Nanfang Daily		

Legend: Red—party media; blue—commercialized media; white—other.

Note 1: The ranking criteria, which include the amount of followers, posts and reposts, etc., are basically the same across three years, but the 2014 ranking included new media such as Rage Comics, Mop.com and Guokr.com, which were not included before. The 2015 and 2016 rankings only included the top ten.

Note 2: The typology of media outlets is based on Chapter 3 of Stockmann's book (Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013).).

Note 3: Technically, *Global Times* is a commercial newspaper affiliated with the *People's Daily*. But it's significantly different from other commercial media, as it is known for its pro-government position and nationalistic appeal. Thus, the authors use the red background here.

Source: Official annual reports published by Weibo. available at: http://data.weibo.com/summary/2012year/influence, http://data.weibo.com/summary/2013year, http://slide.news.sina.com.cn/media/slide_1_37787_81104.html, http://weibo.com/5742418474/D7Ca4uOdN, and http://weibo.com/1752825395/EetbW0rWU (accessed 1 November 2016).

committees, transportation bureaus, National Meteorological Center, China Earthquake Administration. Some of these official accounts have more than 5 million followers on Weibo.[32]

The authors selected 11 government Weibo and WeChat accounts to observe (see Table 3). The major criteria of selection was influence, as measured by social media metrics (the number of followers, posts, comments, retweets, and likes) provided by Weibo[33] and Newrank.[34] The authors further assured for

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[32]E.g. @公安部打四黑除四害 (http://www.weibo.com/u/2328516855, Public Security Ministry's Weibo account, accessed 2 May 2017), @最高人民法院 (http://www.weibo.com/u/3908755088, The Supreme People's Court's Weibo account, accessed 2 May 2017), @平安北京 (http://www.weibo.com/u/1288915263, Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau's Weibo account, accessed 2 May 2017).

[33]'Meiti juzhen shili bang [Rankings for Weibo media accounts]', *Weibo*, (n.d.), available at: http://v6.bang.weibo.com/xmt (accessed 1 July 2016).

[34]'Weixin gonghao paihang [Rankings for WeChat public accounts]', *Newrank*, (n.d.), available at: http://newrank.cn/public/info/list.html?period=month&type=data### (accessed 1 July 2017).

Table 2. Top 10 popular news media WeChat accounts (February–April 2017).

	February 2017	March 2017	April 2017
1	The People's Daily	The People's Daily	The People's Daily
2	CCTV News	CCTV News	CCTV News
3	People's Daily Online	People's Daily Online	People's Daily Online
4	News Night	Reference News	Xinhua News Agency
5	Reference News	Global Times	News Night
6	Metro Express	News Night	Reference News
7	Global Times	Metro Express	Global Times
8	Peninsula morning news	Xinhua News Agency	Metro Express
9	Qianjiang Evening News	Qianjiang Evening News	Qianjiang Evening News
10	New North	Peninsula morning news	Peninsula morning news

Legend: Red—party media; blue—commercialized media; white—others.
Note 1: The typology of media outlets is based on Chapter 3 of Stockmann's book (Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Au-
thoritarian Rule in China*.).
Note 2: Similar to Table 1, we classify *Global Times* as official here.
Source: *newrank.cn*.

the representativeness of the accounts by incorporating different geographic areas (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Jiangsu) and government departments (public security, foreign affairs, earthquake admin-istration, etc.). In addition, the authors drew from reports published by *The People's Daily*'s Online Public Opinion Monitoring Center and those by Weibo's special department on government Weibo[35] to select representative cases.

Trend 3: The Official Promotion of Grassroots Patriotic Bloggers

Finally, another trend this article engages with is the state's identification and glorification of grassroots patriotic bloggers or '*ziganwu*' (a 'voluntary' 50 center or the one who literally 'brings his own food').[36] In a January 2015 article in *Global Times*, for instance, a propaganda official from Anhui Province claimed that a good netizen should be a self-made propagandist or a '*ziganwu*'.[37] Within this broader group of '*ziganwu*', the authorities have singled out individual bloggers and made them into heroes, further facilitating bottom-up patriotism.

The authors selected four influential patriotic bloggers to follow (see Table 3). All of them have hundreds of thousands or even millions of followers, and attracted intensive media attention. Zhou Xiaoping and Hua Qianfang were invited to meet with Xi Jinping and were promoted by state media as exemplar bloggers,[38] and Lei Xiying was promoted by Communist Youth League to represent patriotic students studying overseas.[39] Their viral articles and activities are to be introduced and analyzed in the following sections.

Observing and Analyzing the Practices

After identifying the major trends and representative platforms and accounts of updated official digital persuasion, the authors engaged in cyber or virtual ethnography,[40] closely observing and experiencing

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[35]@政府微博助理, Weibo's assistant account on government Weibo, available at: http://weibo.com/weibozhengfu (accessed 20 May 2015); @政务新媒体学院, Government Weibo skills, available at: http://weibo.com/zhengwuxueyuan (accessed 20 May 2015).
[36]Han, 'Defending the authoritarian regime online'.
[37]Xuanping An, 'Zhongguo hao wangmin ying you naxie biaozhun [Which standards are required to be a good Chinese netizen]', *Huanqiu Net*, (6 January 2015), available at: http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion_china/2015-01/5344625.html (accessed 10 July 2016).
[38]Staff Writer, 'China's president gives blogger 15 min of fame – and scrutiny', *Los Angeles Times*, (22 October 2014), available at: http://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-china-blogger-awkward-20141022-story.html (accessed 10 July 2016).
[39]Xiying lei, 'Cong fenqing dao ziganwu [From angry youth to *ziganwu*]', *China Youth Net*, (27 February 2015), available at: http://qclz.youth.cn/znl/201502/t20150226_6493165.htm (accessed 10 July 2016).
[40]Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce and T.L. Taylor, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Christine Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).

Table 3. List of observed media outlets and social media accounts.

Category		Account	URL or username	Followers or page views
Digital outlets of official media	Online only official media	The Paper (Pengpai)	http://www.thepaper.cn	20 million page views per day (Speelman, "Looking for Smarter, Sexier Chinese State Media?")
	Party media's viral social media accounts	The People's Daily	http://www.weibo.com/rmrb WeChat: 人民日报	52 million on Weibo; 1.43 million on WeChat
		CCTV News	http://www.weibo.com/cctvxinwen WeChat: 央视新闻	49.4 million on Weibo; 1.26 million on WeChat
		Xiake Dao	WeChat: 侠客岛	1.08 million
		Xuexi Xiaozu	WeChat: 学习小组	453 thousand
		Xuexi Daguo	WeChat: 学习大国	28 thousand
Official (both party and government) social media accounts and apps		Ministry of Public Security (公安部打四黑除四害)	http://www.weibo.com/u/2328516855	29.6 million
		Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau (平安北京)	http://www.weibo.com/u/1288915263	12.3 million
		Nanjing Public Security Bureau Jiangning Branch (江宁公安在线)	http://weibo.com/njinga	2.01 million
		Beijing Government (北京发布)	http://www.weibo.com/u/2418724427	8.20 million
		Shanghai Government (上海发布)	http://www.weibo.com/u/2539961154	6.14 million
		Guangzhou Government (中国广州发布)	http://www.weibo.com/u/2605594314	4.58 million
		China Earthquake Administration (中国地震台网速报)	http://www.weibo.com/ceic	5.69 million
		Supreme People's Court (最高人民法院)	http://www.weibo.com/u/3908755088	15.9 million
		Ministry of Foreign Affairs (外交小灵通)	http://www.weibo.com/wjxlt	7.46 million
		Organization Department of CCP	WeChat: 共产党员 App: 学习中国	845 thousand
		Central Party School		
Patriotic Bloggers		Zhou Xiaoping	http://www.weibo.com/u/1218478775 WeChat: 今日平说	622 thousand (Weibo); 765 thousand (WeChat)
		Hua Qianfang	http://www.weibo.com/u/2759526793	128 thousand
		Lei Xijying	http://www.weibo.com/u/1634365454	170 thousand
		Zhanhao	WeChat: 占豪	1.40 million

Note 1: As of 15 May 2017. WeChat doesn't publicly show the amount of followers, the numbers were estimated by *newrank.cn*.

selected digital platforms for an extended time period, and analyzing their key features. From September 2014 to November 2015, the authors have regularly observed the media outlets and social media accounts as shown in Table 3.

Whereas, in conventional ethnography, researchers immerse themselves in a community, in the digital environment, face-to-face communication is replaced by computer-mediated communication. In studying digital texts, the authors follow Sterne and Jones's suggestion that interpreting the context and conditions for a text, event, or practice is more important than interpreting the texts alone.[41] In addition to reading social media posts, therefore, the authors also interpreted the context by considering why these posts are posted and what goals the party-state would expect to achieve, and whether the goals could be achieved in ways of traditional propaganda rather than the new, interactive strategies.[42]

While conventional ethnography encourages researchers to follow people, objects, stories, or metaphors, digital ethnography centers on 'following connections',[43] which refers to links on web pages. This article adopts this approach and extends it to 'following reactions on social media'. The authors have followed the accounts' updates, but also paid close attention to netizens' reactions—how they commented on the posts, what they expressed in the retweets, how they interacted with each other in the comment section, and how they actively used the mention (@) function on Weibo to attract attention from the government organs and official media. This article's approach to the analysis of China's social media builds on a number of other important works in the field that engaged in digital ethnography, including Yang's study of Internet activism[44] and Han's analysis of the 50-cent army.[45]

The study of the above outlined trends and practices found that an important manifestation of the state's digital persuasion is its participatory nature, or what this article defines as 'authoritarian participatory persuasion 2.0', a concept that the authors explain in detail in the following section.

Conceptualizing Authoritarian Participatory Persuasion 2.0

In this study the authors argue that since late 2012, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, the process of information management online has manifested itself in the evolution of digital propaganda toward a more participatory form, or what the authors refer to as 'authoritarian participatory persuasion 2.0'. Unlike the commanding, top-down modes of propaganda in traditional media, the official persuasion online strategically exploits the interactive nature of digital communication and constitutes a shared project between the authorities and citizens.

While previous studies underscore some elements of this participatory persuasion framework, such as the inherent interactivity effect of online platforms and the state-delegated propaganda through the 50-cent army, this study goes beyond documenting these specific manifestations, and attempts to construct a broader framework of the emerging model of authoritarian participatory persuasion 2.0. The analysis is distinct from the notion of responsive or interactive online governance, highlighted by Esarey,[46] as the authors propose that the very production of pro-regime content is turning into an increasingly shared process between citizens and officials. This study further differs from the 50-cent army analysis[47] as the authors depict participatory persuasion as less of a clear-cut transactional relationship between a selective group of netizens and the state, but more as a fluid and multi-layered process of the state's appeals to common citizens to partake in soft persuasion making.

[41]Jonathan Sterne, 'Thinking the internet: Cultural studies versus the millennium', in Steve Jones, ed., *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999), pp. 257–88; Steve Jones, 'Studying the net: Intricacies and issues', in Steve Jones, ed., *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999), pp. 1–27.
[42]It should be noted that while all these activities are happening on commercial platforms Weibo and WeChat, they largely comply with the requirements from the party-state, and sometimes actively create new persuasion strategies.
[43]Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet*, p. 24.
[44]Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*.
[45]Rongbin Han, 'Manufacturing consent in cyberspace: China's "fifty-cent army"', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 44(2), (2015).
[46]Esarey, 'Winning hearts and minds? Cadres as microbloggers in China'.
[47]Han, 'Manufacturing consent in cyberspace'.

Specifically, the concept of authoritarian participatory persuasion 2.0 contains *explicit* and *implicit* dimensions. The former is the state's direct invitation for bottom-up participation in the form of sharing and creating content on official platforms, as well as in the state's endorsing and publicizing of grassroots propagandistic discourses. This creation of content includes participation in governance agenda of the state via crowdsourcing and other initiatives. The latter is the more symbolic component or an implicit invitation for netizens to voraciously partake in the 'family unit' of their leader, Xi Jinping, as well as to consume practical tips and information announcements exclusive to official platforms. Both explicit and implicit dimensions of participatory persuasion reflect the process of upgrading and modernizing propaganda in the digital age, as citizens are either invited to share content in the name of upholding the party, contribute content to the shared mission of better governance, have a closer, more modern relationship with their leader, or enjoy practical tips to improve their day-to-day lives. As such, this article's framework embraces a broad conception of the 'political' by including not solely official policies or propaganda directives, but also governance initiatives and symbolic elements that feed into the state's larger mission of public opinion guidance online.

The concept of 'authoritarian participatory persuasion 2.0' echoes some of the scholarship on Web 2.0, e-governance and participatory digital culture in Western democracies. Namely, parallel to the notion of the party-state's delegation of co-production of positive content to netizens, scholars of democratic contexts demonstrate how politicians guide online political participation to raise awareness of their campaigns and to mobilize support.[48] Similarly to the idea of interaction between netizens and the party in online governances initiatives, studies of Western contexts point to the 'co-production' of governance between citizens and the state in the social media era.[49] With the Internet presenting 'unimagined opportunities to do more for themselves', citizens and the state are now jointly involved in tackling social problems.[50] Finally, the construction of symbolic participation in leader's life via social media in China also resonates with studies of celebrity politics and infotainment trends in the West, whereby politicians fuse entertainment into their political mobilization strategies.[51] These similarities between China and the West, on the one hand support the idea of China as moving in the direction of modernization and Westernization when it comes to the state's digital engagement online. At the same time, whereas in democratic systems politicians' deployment of social media has been associated with potential for civil engagement and participatory democracy, in authoritarian systems, like China, it tends to be linked to the state's reassertion of control over society.[52] Authoritarian participatory persuasion 2.0 differs from digital persuasion in the West in that it leaves fewer spaces for these persuasive attempts to turn into genuine participatory politics.

Authoritarian participatory persuasion 2.0 is also distinct from the participatory propaganda practices in the pre-Internet age, or what the authors may refer to as 'participatory persuasion 1.0'. While the participatory element of engaging society in propaganda resonated in Mao's politics of the 'mass line', especially during the Cultural Revolution,[53] the Internet has rendered it some novel characteristics. Whereas under Mao, citizens were called upon to produce propaganda content for the state in

[48]Rachel K. Gibson, 'Party change, social media and the rise of "citizen-initiated campaigning"', *Party Politics* 21, (2015), pp. 183–197; Christian Vaccari, 'From eco chamber to persuasive device? Rethinking the role of the internet in campaigns', *New Media & Society* 15, (2009), pp. 109–127.

[49]Dennis Linders, 'From e-government to we-government: Defining a typology for citizen co-production in the age of social media', *Government Information Quarterly* 29(4), (2012), pp. 446–454.

[50]Erik W. Johnston, Derek L. Hansen, 'Design lessons for smart governance infrastructures', in Alan P. Balutis, Terry F. Buss, Dwight Ink, eds., *Transforming American Governance: Rebooting the Public Square?* (National Academy of Public Administration, 2011), p. 2.

[51]Mel van Elteren, 'Celebrity culture, performative politics, and the spectacle of "democracy" in America', *The Journal of American Culture* 36(4), (2013), pp. 263–283.

[52]Seva Gunitsky, 'Corrupting the cyber-commons: Social media as a tool of autocratic stability', *Perspectives on Politics* 13(1), (2015), pp. 42–54.

[53]Patricia M. Thornton, 'Retrofitting the steel frame: From mobilizing the masses to surveying the public', in Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry, eds., *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011); Yuezhi Zhao, 'Sustaining and contesting revolutionary legacies in media and ideology', in Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry, eds., *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

the form of art, posters and literature, among other genres,[54] the digital co-production is less directed from the top, with netizens enjoying more leeway in expressing their opinions and creative ideas as part of the persuasion project. The cult of personality dimension also differs between the Mao era and the digital-fueled participation under Xi. Unlike the God-making strategy of promoting the Mao cult,[55] the Internet's capacity to shorten the psychological distance between Xi and the grassroots recreates a celebrity like following of the President, with netizens discussing everything from his trips, to his outfits and speeches. Moreover, the Internet affords for new forms of participatory persuasion, such as the shared participation in governance projects, with netizens enabled to directly channel their ideas and resources back to the state through online platforms, as well as to consume state-provided advice and services online. The speed of social media facilitates the interactive service dimension of participatory persuasion—a practice less feasible before the Internet. Overall, in contrast to the past, we are witnessing a more covert and subtle nature of participatory persuasion. Netizens are not forced to become propagandists, but are carefully cajoled into the official orbit. This article now proceeds to discuss this in detail, starting with explicit calls for participation in official online platforms.

Participatory Persuasion: Explicit Calls for Public Participation

The official digital platforms the authors have observed feature explicit calls for participation via publicly sharing, engaging with, and creating content that tends to feature some aspects of upholding civility, from facilitating community building to improving governance. As for spreading content, official platforms use creative language to encourage public sharing, whereby the verb 'repost' is followed by a multitude of spirited phrases adjusted to a particular context, as evident from the following examples observed on Weibo account of *The People's Daily*: 'Repost, let's pray for the people in the disaster zone together!' 'Repost, those wanting to lose weight!' 'Repost, let all your nearby friends know!' (转发，一起为灾区民众祈福！转发想要减肥的TA！转发，让身边朋友都知道！)[56] Occasionally, the platforms even offer material rewards for reposting content. In one post, for instance, the official Weibo of *The People's Daily* advertised a chance of winning 100 kindles for spreading a message about its co-sponsored activity on the world's reading day,[57] while Beijing municipal government's official Weibo offered 120 vouchers for apple-picking in a suburban area to those who followed its account, shared its post and mentioned three friends in the repost.[58] These commercially motivated reposts tend to facilitate community building activities offline.

Information spreading also takes the form of crowdsourcing whereby citizens are invited to partake in a shared governance mission spearheaded by the party-state. This is particularly notable on government Weibo accounts, with official units frequently pleading with citizens to repost messages aimed at managing crises or emergencies, such as helping in finding a lost child or a missing elderly citizen, in uncovering disaster victims or in sharing practical information about an appropriate behavior during a crisis or an emergency.[59] Digital sharing can be combined with offline action, as exemplified in a popular post by Jiangxi provincial government under a tag of 'immediate help', calling on netizens to

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[54]Patricia Powell and Joseph Wong, 'Propaganda posters from the Chinese cultural revolution', *The Historian* 59(4), (1997), pp. 777–794.
[55]Stefan L. Landsberger, 'Mao as the kitchen god: Religious aspects of the Mao Cult during the cultural revolution', *China Information* 11(2–3), (1996), pp. 196–214.
[56]These are some examples of how reposting is encouraged on Weibo account of *The People's Daily*.
[57]Post on *People's Daily*'s Weibo page, (25 April 2015), (8:00 am), available at: http://www.weibo.com/2803301701/CeRyPF0wB (accessed 20 July 2015).
[58]Post on Beijing Fabu's Weibo page, (16 October 2014), (6:30 pm), available at: http://www.weibo.com/2418724427/BrQw81PW1 (accessed 20 July 2015).
[59]E.g., looking for a lost child: Post on Ministry of Public Security's Weibo page, (10 May 2015), (10:21 am), available at: http://www.weibo.com/2328516855/Ch9TOFq5n (accessed 20 July 2015); looking for a lost senior: Post on Ministry of Public Security's Weibo page, (17 November 2014), (12:31 pm), available at: http://www.weibo.com/2328516855/BwFQ62XYr (accessed 20 July 2015); life-saving tips in emergency: Post on *People's Daily*'s Weibo page, (12 May 2015), (9:03 am), available at: http://weibo.com/2803301701/Chsf0ikog (accessed 20 July 2015).

buy red potatoes from anxious farmers who are struggling to sell them.[60] In these instances, the users are not merely reposting content to get a larger viewership of official propaganda, but are also being called upon to act in more civil ways and to indirectly assist authorities in specific governance domains.

Another form of explicit call for public participation is that of urging netizens to share concerns or to pose questions to authorities via official digital platforms. The dominant selling feature of government Weibo is its interactivity, with the key motto of these platforms being that of 'solving public problems' (*wei minzhong ban shishi*)[61], which invites public interaction. Government Weibo accounts are encouraged from the top to openly compete on this dimension of responding to and solving public grievances. *The People's Daily*, for instance, hosts a weekly online program that ranks official Weibo accounts on their effectiveness in solving problems. It calculates how many replies have been offered by official Weibo accounts and selects the 'timeliest' and 'the warmest' reply of the week. It also publicizes all official replies and allows netizens to judge them by pressing either 'like' or 'dislike' on their screens.[62] Similarly, *The People's Daily*'s Online Public Opinion Monitoring Center publishes quarterly reports analyzing official Weibo accounts. It evaluates official Weibo on how many times the posts are read, shared, and commented on, as well as on the frequency of the official responses to netizen messages.[63] Netizens in turn are incentivized to share their concerns on official digital platforms, ranging from unpleasant dining experience at a college canteen[64] or a difficulty in finding public toilets,[65] to illegal overtime at companies[66] and forced demolitions.[67] Guangzhou city government's official Weibo even encourages netizens to raise questions for routine press conferences held by the city government.[68]

Beyond re-tweeting or engaging with official information online, netizens now also have opportunities to create their own content for official platforms. This is manifested in frequent official calls for uploading photos or essays on specific topics, often made in the context of an officially orchestrated event (*huodong*) or a public holiday. Several city government Weibo accounts, including those of Chengdu, Nanjing, and Guangzhou, for instance, have posted a call for uploading photos of 'harmonious families' as part of the international family day celebration. The event site is crowded with smiling photographs of families and newborns in different landscapes, from green mountains to cities, with happy family spirit shining through each photograph.[69] The digital family celebration has facilitated a lively public discussion, with 12,372, largely uplifting emotional comments shared on the official Weibo platform. Sometimes calls for netizen contribution serve a more immediate strategic objective. In late June 2013, for instance, as the fourth anniversary of 5 July Urumqi riots was nearing, rumors spread about terrorists planning to attack again and Xinjiang authorities enforcing a martial law. To debunk the rumors and promote an imagery of 'life as usual', the official Weibo account of Urumqi city called on netizens to take photos of 'our harmonious capital city' and upload them to Weibo.[70] Most recently, Chinese media outlets invited netizens to share patriotic content. Before the National Day in 2017, for

[60]Post on Jiangxi Fabu's Weibo page, (21 November 2014), (5:01 pm), available at: http://weibo.com/3687019147/BxjkarwJp (accessed 20 July 2015).

[61]Hashtag page #Mashang bangban# on Weibo, available at: http://www.weibo.com/p/100808cf14965532af08fb097ce2022479e906?k=%25E9%25A9%25AC%25E4%25B8%258A%25E5%25B8%25AE%25E5%258A%259E&_from_=huati_topic (accessed 20 July 2015).

[62]Duihua guanwei [Conversation with government Weibo]', *People.cn*, (n.d.), available at: http://t.people.com.cn/duihuagw.html (accessed 10 July 2016).

[63]'Zhengwu weibo chengwei zhihui chengshi zhongyao pingtai [Government Weibo becomes an important platform for smart cities]', *People.cn*, (28 April 2015), available at: http://yuqing.people.com.cn/n/2015/0428/c364391-26917602.html (accessed 10 July 2016).

[64]http://www.weibo.com/3687019147/Cfn7hafvv, http://www.weibo.com/2605594314/AlSOtzlCz.

[65]Yangyang Wu, 'Zhengwu Weibo shishi paihangban 11 [The 11th round of ranking for government Weibo]', *People.cn*, (29 September 2014), available at: http://www.people.com.cn/n/2014/0929/c347079-25757570.html (accessed 10 July 2016).

[66]Yanan Zhang, 'Zhengwu Weibo shishi paihangban 32 [The 32nd round of ranking for government Weibo]', *People.cn*, (16 March 2015), available at: http://www.people.com.cn/n/2015/0316/c347079-26698383.html (accessed 10 July 2016).

[67]Yanan Zhang, 'Zhengwu Weibo shishi paihangban 31 [The 31st round of ranking for government Weibo]', *People.cn*, (9 March 2015), available at: http://www.people.com.cn/n/2015/0309/c347079-26659725.html (accessed 10 July 2016).

[68]Post on Guangzhou Fabu's Weibo page, (11 May 2015), (11:49 am), available at: http://www.weibo.com/2605594314/ChjTR3rXJ (accessed 20 July 2015).

[69]Weibo page on harmonious families, available at: http://focus.weibo.com/pub/i/zt/sspxfjt (accessed 20 July 2015).

[70]Post on Ürümqi Fabu's Weibo page, (30 June 2013), (1:04 pm), available at: http://www.weibo.com/2629250581/zDO9Lu83b (accessed 20 July 2015).

instance, *The Paper* started a participatory campaign 'Come and write your "China"', which invited social media users to write Chinese characters '中国' (China) on their cellphone screens, which would then be shown after the word '辉煌' (magnificent) and along with Chinese ink wash paintings showing the achievements of China such as the high-speed rail.[71] These distinct examples of bottom-up content formation showcase how public input is encouraged to recreate a more civilized or harmonious society, which encompasses as much a happy family life as security, stability, and a sense of patriotic pride solicited by the state.

Finally, more targeted bottom-up creation of pro-party content is also evident in the form of top-down promotion of patriotic bloggers, or '*ziganwu*'. Although their genuine grassroots identities might be questionable, the very intent of the state to portray them as voices of the people highlights the official endorsement of persuasion as a shared project. Zhou Xiaoping (周小平) and Hua Qianfang (花千芳) are two prominent examples, singled out by Xi at a high-level forum on art and literature in Beijing on 15 October 2014. One of the most famous blog posts Zhou wrote before the meeting described his change from a young man deeply admiring Western countries to one who believes in CCP's rule and is highly critical of the U.S. Hua's most well-known work, 'Our Journey to the Promising Land' glorifies CCP's endeavor to end more than a century's national humiliation and make China into a strong country. Their works were originally posted in online forums and blogs. They then went viral and attracted attention from propaganda officials and Xi himself. 'I hope you write more works that spread positive energy', remarked Xi after the meeting.[72] The state-run *Reference News* devoted a whole page to Zhou on the next day, publishing his pieces 'Broken Dreams in America', 'Fly, Chinese Dreams', and 'Their Dreams and Our Flags'.[73] The two bloggers have consequently evolved into national heroes on social media and have assumed semi-official professional positions, with Zhou becoming an executive council member of CYL's Youth New Media Association, and Hua elected as the vice-president of the semi-official Writer Association in Fushun city, Liaoning Province. Since the recognition from the top, they have kept active on social media, diligently defending the party-state and denouncing Western democracies. A recent example is Zhou's argument that the air pollution problem is hyped up by Western countries, which want China to slow down its industrialization process and ultimately to be destroyed.[74]

In October 2014, the official press has venerated a Chinese PhD student at Australian National University, who has organized an online international movement to 'take a photo with a national flag'.[75] Media coverage of the flag movement emphasized the fact that a large number of participants are of the generation of post-90s, quoting a young patriotic netizen: 'Who says post-90s don't love our country? We love our country, and we say it loudly!'[76] The bottom-up bloggers idealized in the media, are the ones who promote the vision of national unity and progress, thereby embodying the notion of a progressive, powerful society advocated from the top. The 'success' of these '*ziganwu*' may also inspire others to follow, hoping that they could be picked out by the top leader.

While reposting, engaging with and sharing content is analyzed separately here, in practice, the three modes of explicit participation are intertwined, with messages addressed to officials and content

[71]Post on Pengpai Xinwen's Weibo page, (30 September 2017), (7:29 pm), available at: https://weibo.com/5044281310/FoeD6A4vR (accessed 2 February 2018).

[72]Yuan Chen, 'Zhou Xiaoping: Xi Dada Dingzhu Wo Zai Wangshang Duo Hongyang Zheng Nengliang [Zhou Xiaoping: Xi Dada Asked Me to Spread Positive Energy Online]', *People's Daily Online*, (17 October 2014), available at: http://culture.people.com.cn/n/2014/1017/c87423-25858744.html (accessed 1 September 2015).

[73]Ning Hui and David Wertime, 'Is this the new face of China's silent majority', *Tea Leaf Nation*, (22 October 2014), available at: http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/22/is-this-the-new-face-of-chinas-silent-majority/ (accessed 3 November 2015).

[74]Post on Zhou Xiaoping's Weibo page, (11 December 2015), (9:15 am), available at: http://weibo.com/1218478775/D7STtnDF5 (accessed 10 July 2016).

[75]Miaomiao Lin, '"Wo He Guoqi He Zhang Ying" wangluo Changyi Yinfa Yiwan Wangmin Xiangying [Millions of Netizens Took Part in the Online Movement "take a Photo with Our National Flag"]', *The People's Daily*, (6 October 2014).

[76]He Zhang, 'Liuao boshi faqi "wo he guoqi he ge ying" wei zuguo qingsheng [Chinese PhD student in Australia launches "take a photo with a national flag" movement to celebrate the birthday of motherland]', (25 September 2014), available at: http://pic.people.com.cn/n/2014/0925/c1016-25729996.html (accessed 10 July 2016); 'Fushida 90 hou xuesheng zai weibo faqi "wo he guoqi he ge ying" [Post-90s student from Fujian Normal University launches "take a photo with a national flag" movement on Weibo]', Dongnan Kuaibao, (6 October 2014), available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hqcj/xfly/2014-10-06/content_12487185.html (accessed 10 July 2016).

posted on official sites also being frequently reposted by netizens. Different official platforms inter-mingle in their attempts at encouraging public participation, with official media accounts highlighting government Weibo activities, as notable in the competition set out by *The People's Daily*, as well as with official media publicizing the writings of patriotic bloggers, and with government Weibo linking to official media. In encouraging sharing and content formation, the regime fosters its vision of civility and order, whereby citizens are partaking in amplifying the sense of community, national glory, and a responsive, efficient government whose primary goal is to serve its citizens.

Participatory Persuasion: Implicit Modes of Co-Opting the Public

Welcome to the Family: Recreating a 'Lived' Experience of the Leader

Other than explicitly calling on netizens to share and create pro-regime content in the name of civility, official digital persuasion platforms also carry implicit participatory characteristics. Netizens are invited to join the 'family unit' of their leader and consume practical services exclusive to official channels. By encouraging this form of participation the authorities are recreating a more modern and intimate way of relating to the leader, as well as modernizing the routine activities of average citizens.

One of the striking features of some digital persuasion platforms, especially of the new official media outlets and public WeChat accounts, is their overwhelming emphasis on the top leader, Xi Jinping. The motto of *Xuexi Xiaozu*, a popular public WeChat account managed by *The People's Daily* Overseas Edition, for instance, reads as: 'These years, advancing together with Xi Jinping, we embark on a shared undertaking!' (这些年，与习近平一起进步，共同担当！). Some platforms further market themselves as exposing users to unique content about different dimensions of Xi's work and life. *Xuexi Daguo* (学习大国), another public account managed by *People's Daily*, for instance, lists 'foreign visits with Xi' as one of the perks of signing up for the account (跟习大大出访). The authors' daily observations of the content on these WeChat platforms, moreover, find that the stories disproportionately feature Xi Jinping, ranging from reposts of his latest public statements to photographs depicting Xi's routine meetings, trips, discussions with foreign dignitaries, and other events. Whereas, some of the news articles are about high-level gatherings, many carry a more personal feel, such as Xi's meetings with rural residents or school children.[77]

While the general emphasis on Xi is not surprising, what appears as innovative in the digital depic-tions of the leader's life is a notable attempt at recreating a sense of physical and emotional closeness between netizens and the leader through interactive depictions of Xi's activities and a portrayal of him as a family member rather than as a distant uptight official. Netizens are being invited to voraciously partake in the life of their leader by digitally accompanying him on his journeys, and through intimate exposure to him as a family man. As for touring with the leader, in contrast to traditional propaganda that merely presented descriptive accounts of leaders' agenda, some of these new platforms allow netizens to 'track' their leader. *Xuexi Zhongguo*, a mobile app developed by the Central Party School, includes a digital map feature that traces all of Xi's travels. Netizens can virtually follow Xi on most of his trips, both domestic and international. Besides tracking the locations on the map, party media outlets also provide exclusive photos of and commentaries about Xi's tours through their social media accounts. Previously, party media journalists traveling with political leaders only published standard news of the visits. Now they are posting photos taken with their smartphones and sharing interesting highlights from behind the scenes. For example, *The People's Daily*'s Xuexi Daguo published exclusive photos and human-interest stories about Xi's visit to Pakistan and Indonesia, and Indian Prime Minister

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77E.g., Yueying Jiangfeng, 'Naxie xiaopengyou he xidada he guo ying? [Which kids have been in photos with Papa Xi?]', Xuexi Xiaozu, (31 May 2014), available at: http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/WPRYK6hB8qzxvDfLIbKyDw (accessed 5 March 2015); 'Xi Jinping de sannong qinghuai [Xi Jinping's care for rural areas]', Xuexi Xiaozu, (1 May 2015), available at: http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/vcvLUpi1oqBSg_teY-SwpXg (accessed 30 May 2015).

Modi's visit to Xi'an with Xi.[78] Most recently, at the start of the 19th Party Congress, the participatory experience has taken a new turn, with the *The People's Daily* new interactive mini-site, that imitates the layout of a WeChat group chat, allowing users to join the chat with party delegates and see their profile picture besides that of Xi.[79] And a new app, launched by Tencent, had netizens compete on how fast they applaud the leader online.[80]

Another dimension of creating personal linkages between netizens and the leader is through depictions of Xi as a family man, inviting netizens to be part of the family—a more intimate unit than that of the party. The latest propaganda video of Presidet Xi by CCTV directly invokes the family metaphor in saying that Xi cares about China like a family man, and that 'one nation is the smallest family unit, and millions of families make up a nation'.[81] This family imagery has been projected over time by uploading happy photographs of Xi with his wife, as well as by presenting separate accounts of his wife and her routines that the users can follow. For example, in December 2014, Xinhua's social media account, Wo Baodao, named Xi and his wife the 'annual national couple (年度国民眷侣)' and posted dozens of photos of them, with captions emphasizing their matching clothing and accessories.[82] Borrowing on the notion of marketing family life as part of political image-making, Chinese persuasion is increasingly aimed at selling the regime not only as an efficient party that delivers, but also as an aspirational family unit. The photographs and 'close to the ground' accounts of Xi's family life are complemented by pervasive references to 'Daddy Xi' (习大大) or 'Uncle Xi', and to his wife, Peng Liyuan, as 'Mommy Peng' (彭妈妈), adding a playful element to one of the world's most powerful couples. In addition to family metaphors, digital accounts of official media have refered to Xi as a 'class leader' (班长), and a [83] 'warm guy' (暖男), which symbolizes a man who is tender, considerate and understanding, giving off a sense of warmth to others, like sunshine.[84]

At Your Service: Participate by Consuming Practical Tips and Services

Another implicit mode of engaging the public is via official offering of practical tips and services, delinked from any ideological content, yet aimed at fostering civility in day-to-day life. 'Digital consultations' available on official sites are directly relevant to routine experiences of an average citizen. These consultations range from tips on preserving vegetables, to suggestions for graduation trips, to career advice, and information on how to prepare for college entrance examination. Some platforms also feature emergency tool kits, like the *People's Daily's* well-designed infographic on first aid, or the Choking Rescue Procedure, that features real-life stories and pictures.[85] Some advisory services are direct initiatives of individual officials, which then get promoted by and shared on official platforms. A colorful example of that is a video produced by a policeman reminding citizens to be aware of online fraud. The video features a young charismatic policeman who recounts a lively story of him browsing

[78]Xiaodu Du, 'Jizhe jin juli yong shouji genpai Xi Jinping chufang de 5 tian [Five days with Xi Jinping's state visits, recorded in photos taken with a smartphone]', Xuexi Daguo, (26 April 2015), available at: http://news.ifeng.com/a/20150426/43633856_0.shtml (accessed 30 May 2015).

[79]'Renmin ribao xinmei jujiao shijiu da [*People's Daily*'s new media initiatives focus on the 19th Party Congress]', (25 October 2017), available at: http://media.people.com.cn/n1/2017/1025/c40606-29606945.html (accessed 2 November 2017).

[80]This app highlights the importance of the corporate sector in fueling participatory persuasion. Eleanor Peake, 'China's new viral app could be straight out of black mirror', *Wired*, (20 October 2017), available at: http://www.wired.co.uk/article/china-app-clap-tencent (accessed 2 November 2017).

[81]'Jiaguo tianxia [Family nation under heaven]', CCTV Video, (18 February 2018), available at: http://news.sina.com.cn/china/xlxw/2018-02-18/doc-ifyrswmt9549315.shtml (accessed 26 February 2018).

[82]'Niandu guomin juanlv: Xi dada yu Peng mama [Annual national couple: Daddy Xi and Mommy Peng]', Wo Baodao, (16 December 2014), available at: http://www.12371.cn/2014/12/16/ARTI1418711439378435.shtml (accessed 30 May 2015).

[83]Zhizu Zheng, 'Banzhang Xijinping [Class Leader Xi Jinping]', *The Paper*, (16 October 2014), available at: http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1270242 (accessed 2 May 2015).

[84]'Nuannan Xi dada [Warm guy Daddy Xi]', *CPC News*, (22 December 2014), available at: http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/1222/c64094-26254729.html (accessed 10 May 2015).

[85]Post on *People's Daily*'s Weibo page, (20 March 2015), (2:02 pm), available at: http://www.weibo.com/2803301701/C9qy19kja (accessed 20 July 2015).

the Internet and nearly falling into a trap of netizen fraud.[86] To the beats of techno music, the policeman urges people not to buy into these schemes: 'I don't know you, I have never met you, never spoke to you, I wouldn't even give you 100 yuan!' While playful and musical, the video sends a powerful message on how to react to anonymous pleas for financial help online. The message went viral after being promoted by the Ministry of Public Security's Weibo account, and exemplifies the official persuasive interaction with citizens in the name of encouraging more civilized behavior, this time strictly on the web.

Many of these digital service announcements are adjusted to current events and immediate concerns of the public. For instance, in times of high-holiday season, like the spring festival, official media offer tips for successfully purchasing train tickets—a frustrating challenge for many Chinese citizens trying to travel to different parts of the country.[87] During the week after the April 2015 Nepal earthquake, the official account of China Earthquake Administration published as many as 110 Weibo posts of useful information, including safety guidelines for those present at the scene. These posts got reposted over 28 thousand times.[88] In mid-May, as the graduation season was approaching, *The People's Daily* posted tips on how to process all the paperwork required for graduation, accept a job offer, and study overseas.[89]

The service provision feature on official platforms can also be initiated by requests from netizens. For example, a woman in Weifang city, Shandong Province who had a crush on a policeman working at a certain intersection, has later posted a weibo message asking how to find this policeman. The official account of Weifang traffic police reposted her message and responded: 'We are trying our best to identify the police officer. If he is single, we will immediately help facilitate contact'. Soon, the official police account announced that the officer is already married. It posted a photo of him from his back and consoled the woman: 'Weifang is large. Have a look at another intersection. We wish you happiness!'[90] Although it was outside of core responsibility of traffic police, by engaging with public service request online and acting as a mediator, the police projected an image of responsiveness and civil behavior, indirectly implying that citizens should resort to police for their concerns ranging from security to romantic engagements.

Though evaluating the popularity of these service features is beyond the scope of this study, the authors came across a number of instances whereby official suggestions enjoyed a wide public following. The healthy food feature publicized by the Communist Party Organization Department, for instance, was viewed over 100,000 on weixin, and the choking rescue procedure was reposted nearly 60,000 times.

Discussion and Conclusions

Despite the occasional use of crude methods in silencing dissent, in the past three decades, the control apparatus has shifted from more overt tactics of the past, to more modern, selective and subtle oversight and surveillance. The analysis demonstrates how digital persuasion corresponds to this overarching trend, whereby authorities have implemented the practice of sophisticated and interactive participatory persuasion, endorsed in the name of progress, order and harmonious happiness. This article's conceptualization of authoritarian participatory persuasion 2.0 and its categorization into explicit and implicit dimensions offers a new lens for analyzing online propaganda as it continues to evolve under

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[86]Post on Ministry of Public Security's Weibo page, (12 January 2015), (6:17 pm), available at: http://www.weibo.com/2328516855/BFe2CcX7f (accessed 20 July 2015).

[87]Post on *People's Daily*'s Weibo page, (7 December 2014), (9:41 am), available at: http://weibo.com/2803301701/BzHhlyQss (accessed 20 July 2015).

[88]Shixuan Zhang, 'Wenqing "Guozi xiaoxin", Mengjing "Jiangning popo", zhengwu hao yin rezhuan [Warm "Guozi xiaoxin" and cute police "Jiangning popo", the government social media accounts went viral]', *People's Daily*, (14 May 2015), available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/zgjx/2015-05/14/c_134238041.htm (accessed 30 May 2015).

[89]Post on *People's Daily*'s Weibo page, (14 May 2015), (10:25 am), available at: http://www.weibo.com/2803301701/ChLD99Xuu (accessed 20 July 2015).

[90]'Jiaojing huifu: yihun, huan ge lukou zai kankan [Policeman replies to woman: I'm married, go to the next crossroad the check for other opportunities]', *Beijing Evening News*, (5 May 2015), available at: http://news.163.com/15/0505/13/AORTU64M00014AED.html (accessed 30 May 2015).

Xi Jinping, as well as for thinking about authoritarian persuasion more broadly, and about the shared characteristics between authoritarian and democratic digital political practices.

While this article primarily focuses on the top-down strategies of digital participatory persuasion, it is important to note here that digital participation does not always adhere to the state-initiated civility code. In fact, the authors' preliminary observations of netizen reactions to digital persuasion strategy suggest that there might be as much collaboration as push-back present in the form of critical discourse. In October 2015, for instance, netizen reactions to the Ministry of Culture's launch of its official Weibo account were largely negative. A comment liked over 23,000 times is ridden with criticism and distrust for the state:

> You manage what we read, what we watch on TV, what movies we see, what we do online, when we drive our cars, what we say, but you don't manage the quality of our food or housing, our health, or our children's ability to attend school.[91]

Similarly, the Red Cross Society in China, a government-controlled organization implicated in multiple scandals in recent years, has drawn continuous harsh criticism and mocking on social media. One of its Weibo posts about activities in earthquake-impacted area, for instance, has drawn hundreds of thousands of comments that contain a single Chinese word, *gun*, or 'get out of the way'.[92] The National Development and Reform Commission's (NDRC) explanation on why it didn't cut the gas price while the global gas prices were plummeting in December 2015, also triggered many uncivil responses. One comment 'F*** you! F*** you! F*** you! The important thing has to be repeated three times' got around 3,500 likes.[93]

Critical netizens also devalue and mock officially orchestrated events aimed at promoting harmony. For example, during the winter break in 2015, the Ministry of Education's official Weibo called followers to look for propaganda banners promoting 'socialist core values' and post photos of them online. Netizens' reactions to this initiative were far from positive: 'Looking for? They are everywhere and I can't escape from them. What a visual pollution!' 'Severe mental illness'. Some seized the opportunity to criticize the ministry: 'I don't think the Ministry of Education is practicing these values. You are making money by launching new college majors at your will'.[94]

This push-back in the form of online satire and critique, of course, is not surprising. As other scholars have argued, legitimation of power presents the foundation for critique. 'Embedded in the very logic of legitimation advanced by a system of domination we can find the grammar that may be used most effectively by citizens and subjects in making statements in opposition and in resistance to that system', wrote Vivienne Shue in her influential essay on the crisis of legitimacy in China.[95] The framework of participatory digital persuasion creates new channels for contestation, as some netizens readapt the official language, slogans and governance promises to mock authorities online. While these creative expressions thus far appear as more of a safety valve than a genuine threat to the regime, they also put pressure on authorities to remain in tune with netizen behavior in order to shape public opinion. As much as legitimation processes can invoke resistance, resistance can also feed back into legitimation as the party-state learns and adapts to online culture as part of reinventing its digital persuasion apparatus. As the authors observed in the analysis, the official platforms adopted the use of trending memes, learned how to '*mai meng*' (play cute and innocent) and how to incorporate humor and multi-media

[91] Josh Chin, 'Culture shock: Chinese ministry slammed on not-so-social media', *Wall Street Journal*, (16 October 2015), available at: http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2015/10/16/culture-shock-chinese-ministry-slammed-on-not-so-social-media/ (accessed 20 November 2015).

[92] Bolin He, 'The uncharitable work of charity', *China Daily*, (10 May 2013), available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2013-05/10/content_16489180.htm (accessed 1 March 2015).

[93] Post on NDRC's Weibo page, (15 December 2015), (4:59 pm), available at: http://weibo.com/5663214224/D8xDM1tEF (accessed 20 July 2015).

[94] Post on Weiyan jiaoyu's Weibo page, (9 February 2015), (11:30 am), available at: http://weibo.com/2737798435/C3tSVt5Il (accessed 20 July 2015).

[95] Vivienne Shuē, 'Legitimacy crisis in China?' in Peter Hays Gries and Stanley Rosen, eds., *State and Society in 21st Century China* (London: Taylor and Francis: 2004), pp. 27–28.

content into their posts, largely from netizen culture. Digital persuasion, therefore, is directly shaped by online culture, and in adapting to it, the party-state also implicitly acknowledges and empowers it.

If we contrast the dynamics of digital propaganda and resistance with the pre-Internet era, what we see is an acceleration in state-society interactions, the vast and multifaceted co-construction of legitimation that would be unfeasible in the past, as well as the creative decentralized resistance streaming out of this legitimation project, and then feeding back into the state's persuasion apparatus. This interactive, fast-paced, more transparent mode of state-society relations leaves less room for error in party's governance, less space for ineffective persuasion campaigns. As Xi Jinping noted in his report to the 19th CCP National Congress, the party has to 'attach great importance to the innovation of communication strategies' and strengthen the influence of state propaganda, especially on the Internet.[96] This, of course, is an old challenge, but the Internet amplifies its significance. As Xi's rule persists indefinitely, it's expected that there will be an expansion of direct and indirect participatory mechanisms the authors outline in the article, paralleled by more creative contention that will persist alongside persuasion even as the party tightens its screws on dissent.

Acknowledgments

Notes on contributors

Maria Repnikova is an assistant professor in Global Communication and the director of the Center for Global Information Studies at Georgia State University. Her scholarship engages with critical journalism, persuasion, cyber nationalism, and nation branding in contemporary China.

Kecheng Fang is a PhD candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. His research interests include political communication and journalism. He has published in academic journals including *New Media and Society* and *Media Asia*.

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[96]'Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress', *Xinhua Net*, (3 November 2017), available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c_136725942.htm (accessed 30 November 2017).