Cyberactivism and Collective Agency: Cases from China

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Abstract. It has been observed that global cyberactivism has challenged the limits of conventional social movement thinking which focuses on shared identity and strategic intention. The objective of this paper is to propose a conceptualisation of 'collective agency,' underlined by an ontology of 'becoming,' which seeks to expand the conceptual space that accounts for the heterogeneity and complexity of online practices in China that are increasingly mediated by the Internet. The conceptualisation of collection agency serves as a theoretical basis for the analysis of China's cyberactivism, which has become increasingly significant in its impact on public life over the last two decades.

Keywords: cyberactivism, collective action, collective agency, social movements, rhizome

1 Introduction: Cyberactivism in China

The so-called "new media power" [1] has never been more manifested than the current global social movements mediated by a growing array of Internet affiliated technologies, including mobile and smart phones, cameras and video cameras, Personal Digital Assistants and Global Positioning System. Compared to democratic countries, China embraces the Internet in a distinct manner in that it is largely disconnected from the global movements yet full of vigor on its own playing ground. The Chinese cyberspace has been found to give rise to alternative communication practices, supporting an emerging public space and facilitating collective action [2], [3].

Cyberactivism started soon after the Internet was brought to China in the late 1990s and has gone through three different technological platforms as central players: Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) entering China in 1998, blogs in 2002, and *weibo* (Chinese microblog platform, similar to Twitter) in 2010. The latter two are connected to, but have not replaced, previous platforms. In 2010, there are over 148 million BBS users, 294.5 million blog users, and over 63 million microblog users [4] – with overlaps among the three groups. It is reported that 54.5% of Chinese bloggers prefer to express their views about social affairs in their blogs [5]. While blogs have played a leading role in cyberactivism since their birth, they have been overtaken by *weibo* as the leader in promoting public participation. For example, in 2011 representatives attending the People's Congress publicized their policy proposals on *weibo*, which

were open for public comments and discussions -- a preliminary type of political participation that never existed before.

Cyberactivism in China is embedded in a social institutional context with the following characteristics: there is a persistent hegemony of state media, which no longer inspires trust from the people; an emerging middle class is increasingly discontent with the lack of public space and political participation; and, more importantly, the perceived deficiency of social justice under the current regime combined with a sense of powerlessness. Cyberactivism, thus, arises as a partial pursuit for freedom of speech and democratic debates. Despite the panopticon of state and commercial censorship, the Chinese cyberspace has over recent years expanded the boundaries of public expression, public debates, as well as explicit criticism on government.

2 Conceptualization of Collective Agency

Rodríguez-Giralt [6] argues that collective action should be considered results, effects, generative consequences of heterogeneous networks of action and interaction, and collective action that is performed: "rather than seeing the 'social movement' as a 'centre of calculation' that successfully coordinates and manages a series of networked organizations, resources and materials, we actually have a series of operators (both human and nonhuman) that create a network and relate to each other, and that, through their interaction, perform a movement" (p. 19). The paper extends from this conception and seeks to move beyond seeing cyberactivism as series of technology-mediated collective actions. Instead, it is considered a form of empowerment, a construction of "collective agency" of which collective actions are instantiations. Collective agency is emergent, dynamic and irreducible to the success and failure of specific actions. It is rather a disposition, property, or propensity of the sociomaterial configuration of the information society in contemporary China.

To develop a conceptualization of "collective agency," we need to draw upon the posthumanist school of thought. The traditional concept of agency attaches exclusively to human, starting from Kant's vision of moral autonomy to Giddens' image of voluntary and knowledgeable actors [7]. On this basis collective agency is normally viewed as human agency expressed through collectivities, or a collectivity that exerts human-like agency, with intentionality, directionality, and causality, such as a government. The posthumanist school of thought rejects such an asymmetrical account of agency and argues that even "human agency" is bound with and exercised through materiality. This not only includes material that humans live and act with, such as clothing, building, tools, but also components inside the human body that are not susceptible to human intentionality. The posthumanist stream of research presents a broad philosophical movement in social science that seeks to challenge the modern dualistic perception of reality.

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, put forward an *ontology of becoming* [8-11]. Similarly, Andrew Pickering has been discussing the double dance of human and nonhuman agency, the "politics of becoming", and the need to recog-

nize phenomena of temporal emergence [12], [13]. A key concept from Deleuze is *assemblage*. What is an assemblage? As Bennett [14] explicates:

"An assemblage is, first, an ad hoc grouping, a collectivity whose origins are historical and circumstantial, though its contingent status says nothing about its efficacy, which can be quite strong. An assemblage is, second, a living, throbbing grouping whose coherence coexists with energies and countercultures that exceed and confound it. An assemblage is, third, a web with an uneven topography: some of the points at which the trajectories of actants cross each other are more heavily trafficked than others, and thus power is not equally distributed across the assemblage. An assemblage is, fourth, not governed by a central power: no one member has sufficient competence to fully determine the consequences of the activities of the assemblage. An assemblage, finally, is made up of many types of actants: humans and nonhumans; animals, vegetables, and minerals; nature, culture, and technology" (p.445).

Another metaphor developed by Deleuze and Guattari [8] is *rhizome*. In botany, rhizome refers to horizontal, underground plant stem capable of producing the shoot and root systems of a new plant, ranging from potato, ginger to weed. As a metaphor, Deleuze and Guattari contrast it to the image of a tree, and characterize it with the following principles:

- Connection and heterogeneity: "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. […] A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles"[8].
- Multiplicity: "reflects the multidimensionality of a rhizome and its process character. This principle acknowledges the variety of horizontal, vertical and lateral relations within a network, as well as its alterability over time [15].
- A signifying rupture: "a rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines. […] Every rhizome contains lines of segmentation according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees" [8].
- Cartography and decalcomania: 'The rhizome is altogether different, a map and not a tracing. [. . .] The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, and susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by any individual group, or social formation" [8].

Collective agency is thus conceptualized as the *agency of assemblages* [14], not possessed by any member of the collective, although it certainly does not deny the agentic performativity of each member as an actant. Instead, it is distributed and emerges temporally from the interactions among actants, constantly influx. The inclusion and exclusion of actants in the assemblage are often *ad hoc* and unpredictable, as the image of rhizome implies, so a clear boundary is difficult to define. Collective agency is rhizomatic in the sense that it "operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots" [8]. It thrives in multiplicity by forming connections in all dimensions without the coordination from a central power. Collective agency could grow

rapidly by coalescing into a great number of participants over expansive spatiality. It could also be broken, subdued, "shattered" at one point, yet emerge again at another time and place, extending the previous connections or starting new ones.

Bennett [14] links the notion of agency of assemblages to the Chinese character *shi*, which implicates the level of energy in a force field and serves to "illuminate something that is usually difficult to capture in discourse: namely, the kind of potential that originates not in human initiative but instead results from the very disposition of things [16]." The character of *shi,* 势，is constructed by two characters piled together – hold and force. However, rather than referring to the possession of power by individuals, it depicts the position or shape of a "spatiotemporal configuration" and the potential force to which that the configuration gives rise. Power and status result from being attached to a strong or well positioned *shi*. So state of affairs is *xing* (shape)-*shi*, advantage is *you* (better)-*shi*, aggression is *qiang* (strong)-*shi*.

Shi is dynamic and always flows. It is possible to build up *shi*, for example via publicity campaign, to ride *shi* to a more advantageous position, and to lose *shi*, usually due to broken connections to powerful networks. Extensively used in ancient military strategy, *shi* is typically assessed by taking into account material elements like geographical conditions (e.g., mountain and river), weather (e.g., such as wind direction, armaments, food supply, as well as social elements like soldiers' morale), and capability (e.g., are they used to fighting on boats?). A Chinese idiom says "times and *shi* create heroes," in contrast to the individualistic and self-made image of heroes in Western mass culture. The Chinese culture, thus, sees heroes, or individuals, as the effect or outcome of a particular configuration of time, space and the energy that flows through. In this sense, it endorses a decentered ontology of becoming.

3   The Collective Agency of Cyberactivism in China

There has been a wide range of cyberactivism since the late 1990s mediated by BBSs, blogs, and *weibo*. They are mostly self-organized, unplanned and rhizomatic, namely, decentered. In this section, we will examine different types of online activism on the Chinese Internet in terms of the effect they produce, especially in relation to public events which trigger online contention. The Internet projects "the gaze" from netizens to authority, a leveling effect of rhizomatic assemblage, and at times leads to direct impact on government behavior (i.e., instantiations of *shi*). Cyberactivism is found to be "fluid, episodic, and emergent", engaging in "informational politics" which asserts widespread influence and public pressure on the authority, and in some cases, result in changes in governmental behavior or even institutional and regulatory changes [17].

With rapid economic progress and a rising middleclass, the Chinese people are increasingly frustrated with the lack of access to public information, or truthful information, given the low credibility of state-owned media sources and the Great China Firewall. New media technologies have become the most important source of information in the Chinese society mostly gathered and communicated by netizens themselves, namely online citizen journalists [17]. For example, a famous blogger Qu Minglei runs a blog called "One Man's Newspaper", which includes real time photos

and reports sent by villagers defending their land from being enlisted by local government, as well as in-depth investigation on the silence of earthquake warning in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake with 85,000 dead or missing [18]. His blog is pushing the limits of critical journalism in China where traditional media are still handicapped.

The challenge to traditional media is even more obvious with *weibo*, where users can follow a large number of microbloggers, ranging from celebrities and media to public intellectuals and opinion leaders. *Weibo* provides faster, wider, more diverse, more direct, and less censored information. News agents often release firsthand news briefs on *weibo* before broadcasting them through their formal channels. The press actively follows and responds to emerging public issues and sentiments on *weibo*. Some *weibo* accounts owned by international or Diaspora users serve as bridges across the two sides of the Great Fire Wall. One prominent example is Lao Rong, a Muslim businessman devoted to broadcasting news from foreign media, covering the Libyan civil war by transmitting information from the Al-Jazeera and Western news programs. Publicly opposing to state-led public opinion that initially perceived Gaddafi as an anti-American hero, Rong supported the revolution, attracting hundreds of thousands of followers on *weibo*.

The most critical agentic performativity emerging from cyberactivism is sustaining the virtual "Gaze", referring to focused public attention on specific public events. One of the earliest and most cited examples is the famous case of Sun Zhigang in 2003 [17], whose death in a custody and repatriation centre led to public outrage on BBSs and blogs, and consequently the repeal of a state regulation aimed to control mobility of population. In the years that followed this even, slow and painstaking changes were seen, which indicated that some of those in government are reluctantly learning to respond to an unprecedented level of bottom-up attention and criticism, as opposed to being solely accountable to superior authority as in the pre-Internet era.

The gaze on the cyberspace has a Chinese term *weiguan,* the surrounding gaze [19] which literally means "crowds of people gathering around some kind of public spectacle." On the cyberspace, *weiguan* constitutes a collective gaze from numerous people on public events, mediated by posts, blogs, and *weibo* on the topic. Some believe that the power of the *weiguan* can "transform" China. One of the recent examples is the Yihuang public incident [20]. A couple of Zhong sisters escaped abduction from local government rescued by real time *weibo* broadcast by a journalist Deng Fei who was connected to them by mobile phone. The two young women were cornered in an airport toilet by local government agents blocking them from flying to Beijing to report the dismantling of their house by local authority, which led to the self-immolation of three members of the family in protest. Within hours of the incident, the tweets on *weibo* were followed and re-tweeted by tens of thousands of netizens and brought local journalists to the live scene. With the event publicized, the Zhong sisters and their family members were released after brief detainment, and a number of local government officials were disciplined afterwards.

In 2009, the Propaganda Department of Yuannan Provincial Committee invited ten netizens to participate in the investigation of the death of a man Li who died in pris-

on[1]. The cause of death given by the local police was that Li accidentally hit his head on the wall while playing "duomaomao" (hide and seek) with his eyes covered. The incredulous excuse sparked discussion among netizens. While those who participated in the investigation complained that they were unable to reach the core of the issue, the police eventually admitted that Li died of violent abuse from fellow inmates. Some argue that the participation of citizens in a criminal investigation was not necessarily beneficial to the rule of law, yet it clearly indicates the intensification of the public gaze on the authority.

"Duomaomao" subsequently became a popular Internet catchphrase as a mockery on the corruption and absurdity of authority. Other similar phrases include "push up" (referring to a suspected case of rape murder that led to a local riot) and "to buy soy sauce" (referring to apathy to public events). The cyberspace in China, albeit censored, seems to produce a type of public discourse characterized by subdued satire, dark humor underlined by suppressed discontent. This online discourse is an extension of the "nonofficial discourse universe" carried on short messaging services (SMS) [21]. Similar to SMS practices that are disorderly, disposable, and ephemeral [22], public discourses constitute an alternative form of media to the top-down, durable and purposeful traditional Chinese media. In face of the abuse of power, social inequality and institutionalized injustice, many people express their discontent through satire and subtle critique. The remarks are often not directly subversive to the political regime, but constitute a moderate form of cultural and ideological challenge to existing social conditions, contributing to increasingly pluralistic political undercurrents that defy the discursive hegemony of the Communist Party [21].

The creativity and versatility of the Chinese language is fantastically demonstrated in new media discourses. A rich and innovative vocabulary has evolved from new media and spread on the Chinese Internet. New characters, words, phrases, and expressions have been created (or modified from the original to bypass censorship) that can be easily grasped by anybody immersed in the new media habitats. For example, the verb "harmonize" has been used to mean state censorship or crackdown, a sarcastic reference to the state slogan of "a harmonious society". A person could be "harmonized," meaning excluded or disappeared; a "harmonized" public scandal means it was covered up or censored. Later the phrase evolves to "river crab," a synonym of "harmony" (he-xie), to avoid censorship.

Weibo discourses often reveal people's emotions which reflect social sentiments in that period. For example, the majority of netizens showed sympathy towards a young man who killed six police officers at a police station as revenge for the abuse and humiliation he received from the police when he was accused of bicycle theft. While he readily pleaded guilty to manslaughter, many viewed him as a victim. This sentiment of netizens clearly pointed to the tension between citizens and the police representing the authority with unrestrained power and minimal accountability. In contrast, many netizens were elated at the death penalty of another young man Yao Jiaxin who stabbed a middle age woman eight times to death when she tried to write down his car plate number after being run over. A well-behaved university student with elitist par-

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[1] http://news.sina.com.cn/z/ynduomaomao/

ents, Yao repeatedly apologized and shed tears on TV yet failed to receive public sympathy, especially from those who perceived him symbolic of the dehumanizing effect of social inequality. Rational or not, public emotions related to social justice could be expressed and debated via new media and traditional media. Various voices can be heard and different perspectives are allowed to interact publicly. Even though radical comments are likely to be "harmonized", the virtual civil space is closer to the Habermasian "public sphere" than what was ever conceivable before the Internet era.

4 The Case of South China Tiger

Described above are aspects of collective agency performed and enacted by cyberactivism, what Yang [2], [17] calls "information politics," which are bottom-up and highly inclusive. It should be noted that the assemblages of cyberactivism are deeply intertwined with the lifeworlds of actors; hence, there is the possibility of practical social changes. Cyberactivism rhizomatically extends to, and becomes intertwined with offline activities, through mobilization of individual or collective action. The following case of the South China Tiger serves as one such example[2].

The South China Tiger is believed to have been extinct for half a century. In 2007, a villager Zhou Zhenglong in Shaan'xi province reported that he spotted one in the local woods with a number of photos he claimed to have taken within a short distance from the tiger. Zhou was given financial rewards and praised as a "hero," and the provincial Forest Bureau set up a natural reservation park in the area. One week after the news appeared in press, a researcher from the Chinese Academy of Science commented in his blog that the photo could be a forgery, while others disputed such accusation and the provincial Forestry Administration dismissed any unofficial challenge. With growing public attention, the State Forestry Bureau (SFB) subsequently decided to start an investigation to verify the claim but did not reach any conclusion.

In November, a legal scholar Hao Jingsong appealed to the SFB to investigate the case further. His request was denied. A few days later, on a photography BBS, it was pointed out that the tiger in the photos resembled a painting on a Chinese calendar. A lawyer filed a formal complaint to a local police station, which turned the case into criminal investigation. In December, Netese (www.163.com), organized a collaborative analysis of the case among a group of experts including a biologist, forensic experts, a criminal detective, a digital image analyst and a telecommunication professor, who concluded that the photos were fabricated. Later, legal scholar Hao Jingsong filed a lawsuit at the Beijing Intermediate People's Court against the SFB's decision to deny his request. Again losing the case, he appealed at the Beijing High People's Court. Meanwhile, more academic publications disputed the authenticity of the photos. In May 2008, Dr. Li Changyu, a famous American Chinese detective, discredited the tiger photos. Drawing upon the Act of Government Information Openness that took effect on 1st May 2008, Hao requested the State Forestry Bureau and Shaan'xi Forestry Administration to release information on the case. Under relentless public

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[2] http://news.sina.com.cn/z/hnhzhpyy/

pressure, at the end of June 2008, the Shaan'xi government admitted that the South China Tiger was a "paper tiger". Zhou was arrested, the award withdrawn, and a number of government officials penalized.

5   Analysis

This case shows that heterogeneous actors and actants form connections that constitute a socio-material assemblage. While the assemblage was decentralized, networked and fluid, strategic actors play critical roles in translating and mobilizing the network. For example, the legal scholar Hao perseveres in enacting legal procedures to hold the authority accountable. However, his agency would be unproductive without the support of *weiguan* and participation from netizens, which builds up the *shi* of the assemblage and changes the power dynamic between the state and citizens. Artifacts also serve as important actants in the assemblage, which demonstrate significant performativity in the mobilization processes. While the new media tools, the Internet, computers and smart phones, and the *weibo* platform provide infrastructural support to cyberactivism, the tiger photos serve as "boundary objects" [23] of the networks which link participants, while legal procedures have agency strong enough to change the momentum of the mobilization of the assemblage.

In our case, it is easy to observe the rhizomatic and temporal emergent character of the movement. Unexpected connections are forged contingently, for example, a blog post, a publication, an individual, or an organization, could join the assemblage without centralized, and pre-conceived design. Linkages could be broken, dissipated, modified, resumed or reinforced. With cyberactivism, participation is usually voluntary and ties tend to be loose among actors, so it is normal for people or things to come in and out of the network at any point. The outcome of the movements is contingent upon the rhizomatic movement, and "things can always be otherwise".

While the case reported here has produced visible institutional result (whether the result has any sustaining effect is another point), there are numerous cases where the assemblage is not sufficiently mobilized to mount to any significant public event, or are simply suppressed by the regime, as in the China Red Cross scandal in 2011[3]. From the perspective of collective action, they may be considered failures. If, however, we take the perspective of collective agency with a rhizomatic ontology, the failures should not be dismissed as insignificant, because they are deeply connected to collective agency emerging from cyberactivism.

If cyberactivism can be said to be contributing to an emerging civil society, it is through the reconfiguration of relative *shi* of social actors, thereby partially and gradually transforming power relations under the current institutional and political settings. *Shi* is defined by the temporal, spatial and resourceful position of an actant. The collective agency of the assemblage of citizens, technologies, and relevant social and civil groups can be perceived as the *shi* of this collective as opposed to the authoritative actors. A formerly powerless individual becomes empowered when connected to

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[3] http://news.hexun.com/2011/gmm/

the sociomaterial assemblages in cyberspace and in real life, as shown in the examples presented in this paper. While *shi* is fluid and constantly changing, it depicts dynamics of the field of civil society with potentially institutional consequences.

6   Conclusion

The traditional concept of collective action is not sufficient to account for new forms of social movements in the cyberspace. This paper suggests that collective actions are instantiations of collective agency, which does not necessarily feature pre-defined identities, groups or organizational strategies. The conceptualization of collective agency is based on a decentered ontology of becoming, constantly in flux and flows and its instantiations are often episodic, improvised, and ephemeral. The performance of collective agency of Chinese netizens is deeply entangled in the tension and power dynamics between authority and citizens. While far from deliberating democratic processes, collective agency has opened up a public sphere as an important pre-cursor to a civil society. This expanding capability of public participation and civic engagement constitutes a type of collective agency that is not reducible to individual agency, although individual agency is very important and can be well exercised if enacted.

It is not the intention of this paper to paint a rosy picture of cyberactivism in China as democratic vehicle. It is clear that the majority of Internet users show little interest in public affairs and political issues. Cyberactivism are often perceived as chaotic, destructive and irrational. Faced with waves of public discontent, State censorship on the Internet has strengthened in recent years rather than loosened. The authority has greatly increased its effort in deploying technological and political strategies to divert, dissipate, or suppress online contention. Nevertheless, this paper attempts to move beyond a deterministic view of cyberactivism. What distinguishes online activism from conventional collective action lies with, at one level, structural manifestation as decentered networks and diversified identities, and at another level, temporal and situational fluidity. A more long-term perspective that accommodates rhizomatic dynamics may be more suitable for us to understand cyberactivism.

If we consider cyberactivism a type of social movement, it is perhaps short-sighted to focus solely on success and failure or particular episodes of collective actions. Rather, the ontology of becoming with rhizomatic dynamism allows us to move away from a perception of social progress as a linear process to that of temporal emergence that entails both "successes" and "failures", uncertainty and spontaneity, improvisation and struggles, growth and disruption, and progress and regress. The collective agency emerging from cyberactivism can be compared to tides with ebbs and flows, and moments that are high or low. As indicated by recent global movements and societal changes transitions, the power of tides is too easily predictable.

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