

# HOW CHINA HAS ADOPTED A REACTIVE CENSORSHIP MODEL FOR THE INTERNET AGE

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the inner workings and manipulation strategies of the Fifty Cent Party and demonstrates how they are used as an instrument of Chinese “disaster politics.” It draws on two primary sources—an in-depth interview with a Fifty Cent Party member and a series of leaked emails from the Zhanggong District Internet Information Office—and examines the responses of the Fifty Cent Party to two events, the 2015 Tianjin explosions and the 2013 Shanshan riots. To frame the role of the Fifty Cent Party in China’s censorship monolith I use the theoretical framework of disaster politics. First, I introduce existing literature on disaster politics and protest management. Next, I examine how and why China has changed its censorship strategies to be more reactive in the internet era. Then I examine the inner workings of the Fifty Cent Party by analysing my two primary sources. Finally, I use two studies to show how the Fifty Cent Party responded in real-time to two “sudden public emergencies” that occurred in China in recent years.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

China came online in the 1990s. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Communist Party (CCP) had attempted to censor the country's media platforms, but the internet posed a new challenge because of the breadth of its reach and its ability to instantaneously transmit information. Bill Clinton in 2000 said: "We know how much the internet has changed America ... Imagine how much it could change China ... [The Beijing regime] has been trying to crack down on the internet—good luck. That's sort of like trying to nail Jello to the wall." (Clinton, 2000).

To deal with this new challenge, the CCP has had to change its censorship strategies<sup>1</sup> (Feng, 2017; Zou, 2015; Li, 2010; Zhang, Li & Xu, 2010). Whereas it previously employed a more preventive censorship approach, social media has forced the CCP to become more dynamic and manipulate information in real time. One important way they have done so is by creating an 'army' of web commentators whose job it is to guide online public opinion in internet forums. This group is known as the *wumaodang* 五毛党 [Fifty Cent Party], named after the alleged monetary amount they are paid for each posting.

This article examines the inner workings and manipulation strategies of the Fifty Cent Party and demonstrates how they are used as an instrument of Chinese 'disaster politics'. It draws on two primary sources—an in-depth interview with a Fifty Cent Party member and a series of leaked emails from the Zhanggong District Internet Information Office—and examines the responses of the Fifty Cent Party to two events, the 2015 Tianjin explosions and the 2013 Shanshan riots. To frame the role of the Fifty Cent Party in China's censorship monolith I use the theoretical framework of disaster politics. Although disaster politics typically deals with governments responding to natural disasters, in China the CCP groups natural disasters with man-made accidents, protests, and public health emergencies as 'sudden public emergencies' (Yan & Liu, 2005; Lu & Lu, 2010; China Digital Times, 2010). These events have the potential to create a political backlash and upset the social order and have become more volatile in the internet age because of the speed at which information travels online, and the ability of social media to disseminate news to huge audiences. The CCP employs a similar reactive censorship strategy in dealing with all of them. Namely, they use the Fifty Cent Party to redirect online public discussions about politically sensitive events through 'strategic distraction' (King, Pan & Roberts, 2017).

This topic merits investigation for several reasons. First, disaster politics is a volatile arena and Chinese governments from the ancient period until now have been wary of the tendency of sudden, often unexpected, calamities to unseat them. For this reason, the CCP pays particular attention to censoring the reporting of attention-grabbing events that they believe could harm their credibility as rulers. Second, the internet has greatly increased the speed information travels, making it important for politicians to react immediately and dynamically to sudden public emergencies and control online

narratives. Third, in a country flush with media attention on pollution and corruption in the CCP, these emergencies are viewed as incredibly sensitive, since they can be rapidly politicized and used as fuel for social activists. Finally, the adoption of the Fifty Cent Party by the CCP shows a regime adapting to the information age by becoming more dynamic in the ways it controls information.

This paper is divided into four sections. First, I examine the existing literature on disaster politics and protest management. Next, I examine how and why China has changed its censorship strategies to be more reactive in the internet era. In the third section I introduce the Fifty Cent Party, the reactive censorship agents of the CCP, and examine their inner workings by analysing two primary sources: the Fifty Cent Party member interview and the leaked Zhanggong District emails. In the final section, I use two studies to show how the Fifty Cent Party respond in real-time to two ‘sudden public emergencies’ that occurred in China in recent years, the 2015 Tianjin explosions and the 2013 Shanshan riots.

## 2. DISASTER POLITICS

Disaster politics focuses on how governments respond to disasters. The politics surrounding disasters was first explored in depth by Abney and Hill (1966), who used the example of the influence of Hurricane Betsy in Louisiana on the 1965 New Orleans mayoral election to argue that how a government responds to a natural disasters can impact its governing legitimacy. Bommer (1985) expanded on this by looking at the politics surrounding a 1972 earthquake and a 1982 flood in Nicaragua and exploring how an effective government disaster response is determined by the state of a country’s domestic politics as well as a country’s relation with the international community. In 1983, two separate books by Fred Cuny, an international disaster relief specialist, and academic Michael Hewitt, argued that the negative impact of natural disasters is directly correlated with a country’s socioeconomic conditions (Hewitt, 1983; Cuny, 1983).

Hewitt also noted that the growing international recognition that the destructive effects of disasters were not just ‘Acts of God’ but the result of ‘misapplication of technology’. (Hewitt, 1983: v) This argument reapportioned blame and posited that the bad consequences of disasters depend to a large extent on disaster preparedness and response of governments.<sup>2</sup> Cuny asserted that disasters often bring ‘changes in the structure of community leadership’ who rise to replace leaders killed in the disaster itself ‘but more often to replace those who have proved ineffective or unable to cope in the aftermath of a disaster.’ (Cuny, 1983: p.13).

Albala-Bertrand (1993) examined the long-term political consequences of 28 natural disasters through a political economy framework, noting that disasters were likely the root cause of political regime change in the cases of the 1972 Managua earthquake, the 1970 East Pakistan typhoon, and drought-induced famines in Ethiopia in 1973 and 1974 (Pelling & Dill, 2010: p.24). This direct correlation between disaster response and

regime change was further explored by Olson and Gawronski (2003), who argued that two major earthquakes in Latin America in 1972 and 1985 represented a ‘critical juncture’ in the national and local political regimes of Nicaragua and Mexico City, respectively.

Drury and Olson (1998) measured the political unrest following a disaster by using a Poisson regression on disasters between 1966 and 1980 that killed more than 1,500 people. This study proved statistically the connection between disasters and political unrest. In 2010, Pelling and Dill identified the ‘post-disaster political space’ that opens in the wake of disasters and argued that in the case of the 1999 Marmara earthquake, the Turkish government breached a ‘social contract’ to protect its citizens. The breach of said contract opened a post-disaster political space that threatened the legitimacy of the Turkish government. More recently, mishandled response efforts to Hurricane Katrina caused George W. Bush’s approval ratings to plunge.<sup>3</sup> US News and World Report reported the comments of a former Bush advisor: “He never recovered from Katrina. The unfolding disaster with the Iraq war [a conflict which Bush ordered] didn’t help, but it’s clear that after Katrina he never got back the popularity that he had.” (Walsh, 2015).

Finally, since the Chinese government groups natural disasters with man-made accidents, protests, and public health emergencies under the official designation *tufa gonggong shijian* 突发公共事件 [sudden public emergency] (Ministry of Emergency Management of the PRC, 2018) and works to shut down their political spaces, it may also be useful to briefly examine literature on popular protest management in authoritarian regimes. Although consolidation of power in high-capacity autocracies like China has made successful revolutionary movements bringing about regime change more difficult to achieve (Goodwin 2001: p.25–30, 296), popular protests are nevertheless a recurrent feature of non-democratic regimes, and often lead to changes in personal composition and policies of elites (Vladisavljević, 2014).

Andersen, Møller, Rørbæk, and Skaaning (2014) used a cross-national, large-N analysis to demonstrate a correlation between state capacity and regime survival both in democracies and autocracies. They write, ‘A capable state can, on the one hand, increase the legitimacy of democracy and the sanctity of political and civil rights and, on the other hand, help tighten an autocrats’ hold on power.’ They further argue that two factors affect regime stability in autocracies: monopoly on violence and administrative effectiveness. Forceful and sometimes violent suppression of popular uprisings is not enough to keep an autocratic regime stable; instead, governments must also maintain a performance legitimacy outside of brute force.<sup>4</sup>

Shock (2004) examines why some non-violent insurrections in the ‘third wave’ of democratization in the late 20th century were unsuccessful (anti-regime movement in Burma and pro-democracy movement in China), while others succeeded (anti-apartheid in South Africa, people power movement in the Philippines, pro-democracy movement Nepal, and the antimilitary movement in Thailand). In China, the students’

rapid occupation of Tiananmen Square and ensuing hunger strikes turned the insurrection into a zero-sum ‘moral crusade’ after which ‘a head-on collision was almost inevitable.’ (Zhao, 2001: p.232). When the well-organized and heavily armed Chinese government ultimately decided to crush the insurrection, the fragmented resistance was quickly ended.

In summary, disaster politics is a field of academic study that focuses on how governments respond to disasters, and the political consequences that may arise because of them. Disasters open a political space in their wake, which, if not properly managed, can mark a critical juncture in the political legitimacy of a government. In China, disasters are grouped by the government with other sudden public emergencies that similarly open post-disaster political spaces.

In the following sections I will examine how the Chinese government uses the Fifty Cent Party as an agent of Chinese disaster politics. First I contextualize the Fifty Cent Party by explaining how the rise of social media has forced the CCP to shift to a reactive censorship strategy. Next, I examine two primary sources: a phone interview by Ai Weiwei with a Fifty Cent Party member and a leaked email archive of Fifty Cent Party directives by the Zhanggong District propaganda bureau. Although academics like Jennifer Pan have exchanged brief online messages with internet commentators (see p. 11), Ai Weiwei’s interview is the only extended on record discussion with a self-identified Fifty Cent Party member. Similarly, the more than 2,700 Zhanggong District emails sent in 2013 and 2014 that were hacked and subsequently leaked by the anonymous blogger ‘Xiaolan’ represent the only large-scale repository of Fifty Cent Party directives by government officials. Consequently, they offer a rare view of the inside mechanics of how the Fifty Cent Party operates.

In the final section I use a regression analysis by Blake Miller and Mary Gallagher as well as an analysis of the Zhanggong District leaked email archive by Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts to examine how the Fifty Cent Party responded to the 2015 Tianjin explosions and the 2013 Shanshan riots. These are the only large-scale, multiple-source analysis of how the Fifty Cent Party manipulates the post-disaster political space of ‘sudden public emergencies’.

### 3. CHINA’S NEW CENSORSHIP STRATEGIES IN THE INTERNET AGE

China came online in 1994 after completing its first cable connection to the World Wide Web (Yang, 2009: 2). By the end of 2003 the number of Chinese net users had grown to 79.5 million (CNNIC, 2003). Social media took off in the following decade and the country saw the launch of now industry giants Renren, Sina Weibo, and Wechat in 2005, 2009, and 2011, respectively. In 2017, these three social networking sites had a combined monthly active user base of about 1.35 billion people<sup>5</sup> (Tencent, 2017; Renren, 2017; Sina, 2017).



CCP officials are instructed to *chuli* 处理 [handle] public opinion emergencies, a euphemism for making the problem go away (China Digital Times, 2017). A situation that has been ‘well-handled’ maintains social stability and does not affect the credibility of the CCP. (Shirk, 2011: 32). One way they do so is through censorship, which broadly speaking can be divided into static (preventive) and dynamic (reactive) censorship (Spirk, 2014: p.12). Of the two, preventive censorship allows information to be more easily controlled, since the publication never occurs in the first place. The press and publishing houses never allow the mass population to see the censored material. On the other hand, reactive censorship requires officials to search out already published content and remove it. The sheer size of the internet as well as the ability of social media to disseminate information and quickly metastasize public opinion has greatly increased the importance the CCP must place on reactionary censorship. Even if the censors remove a sensitive posting, it can quickly be cached and shared across social media.<sup>6</sup>

This speed has sharply reduced the amount of time the Party has to control narratives in the ‘sudden public emergency’ post-disaster political space. The article ‘New Media Era: The Golden Four-Hour Rule for Handling Sudden Emergencies’ published in the state-owned *People’s Daily* identifies the ‘golden four hours’ immediately following an ‘incident’ in which media shapes public opinion (Li, 2010). Referring to the pre-internet age, Li writes: ‘The traditional view is that emergencies should be handled within a ‘golden 24 hours’, meaning that authoritative news should be released within 24 hours of the incident to quell [rumours of] the incident.’ However, ‘With the advancement of communication technology... information that used to be delivered in a few days or months can now be achieved in a matter of minutes, or even in live broadcast.’ This means public opinion can quickly metastasize around events: ‘The rapid dissemination by online media can lead to [the spread of] misinformation... Within a few hours, the ‘Golden 4-Hour Media’ could spread and ferment an emergency into an event with a major public opinion impact.’

And this forced the Party to recalibrate how it censors. Peter Marolt divides the ways the Party censors the internet in China into ‘direct censorship, self-censorship, and dynamic manipulation of online discourse.’ (Marolt, 2011: p.54) Direct censorship includes projects like what has become known as the ‘Great Firewall of China’, a series of legislative actions and technologies that actively block entire websites and keywords the government considers politically sensitive. Self-censorship is a government fear tactic that tries to make net users think twice before posting sensitive topics. Censorship mascots Jingjing and Chacha (a ‘cute’ reference to *jingcha* 警察 [police]; the ‘cuteness’ is signalled by the repetition of characters) appear all over the Chinese internet and official speeches and party slogans echo the desire to suppress dissidence and make China into a ‘harmonious society’ —the catchphrase and socioeconomic vision of the Hu Jintao Administration (Marolt, 2011:p.54). Susan L. Shirk writes that the ‘very visible hand of the censor is intended to intimidate users with the omnipresent authority of the CCP’ (Shirk, 2011: p.33).

However, ‘dynamic manipulation of online discourse’ is specific to social media. Excluding several outright banned topics like the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, netizens are generally allowed to debate politically sensitive topics online. The censors closely monitor these spaces and intermittently interject to shape the debates. A study by three students<sup>7</sup> from the Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications and presented at the 2010 International Symposium on Emergency Management in Beijing argued for the need for governments to ‘guide internet public opinion’ in the wake of disasters, since the spreading of misinformation can cause ‘unrest of people and insecurity of society’ (Zhang, Li & Xu, 2010: p.192). It is unrealistic, the authors argue, for the government to completely shut down public discussion of events in the internet age and must instead work to shape the online narratives by ‘using the mass media to disseminate information from the government.’ (Zhang, Li & Xu, 2010: p.192). In the next section, I will examine how they do so with the Fifty Cent Party.

#### 4. AGENTS OF REACTIVE CENSORSHIP: THE FIFTY CENT PARTY

The Fifty Cent Party began as online forum moderators at Nanjing University in March 2005. In the decade prior, the number of college internet bulletin board systems (BBSs), which were online forums where students at different universities share school-related information with one another, had been rapidly increasing. BBSs were initially open to anyone with an internet connection, but as these communities quickly expanded in size and began including outside members of the public—the Christian Science Monitor reported in 2005 that some college message boards had ‘hundreds of thousands of users, even though the host-school [had] only 10,000 to 20,000 students’—they became an ‘unofficial news alternative to state-run TV, radio, and newspapers.’ (Marquand, 2005). Discussions on BBSs included sensitive topics, like Tibet and Taiwan, that were normally censored by the party in official media outlets (Open Net Initiative, 2005).

To tighten control on this space, in March 2005 the Chinese Ministry of Education ordered individual universities to censor these bulletin boards and remove any users who were not matriculated at the associated schools. To comply with this mandate, Nanjing University party officials recruited a team of students to act as web commentators and moderate the university’s BBS. Instead of outright deleting sensitive posts, this group would browse the forum and engage net users by arguing against ‘undesirable information’ (Bandurski, 2008: p.42) from a party standpoint. Other Jiangsu party officials and then the central government adopted this model of internet moderating and these commentators came to be known as the ‘Fifty Cent Party’ (Bandurski, 2008: 42). In 2007 President Hu Jintao gave a speech where he called on party officials to use the internet as a “new platform” for “spreading healthy information” about core socialist values (Xinhua, 2007). Immediately after central party officials and the State Council circulated a document that called for ‘comrades of good ideological and political character, high capability and familiarity with the internet to form teams of Web commentators ... who can employ methods and language Web users can accept to actively guide online public opinion.’ (Bandurski,



2008: p.42). This process has been continued under Xi Jinping, who in 2014 created the Cyberspace Administration of China—the country’s central internet regulator, censor, oversight, and control agency—in an ongoing effort to centralize internet control. Laws and regulations designed to wrap censorship in a cloak of legitimacy have followed since then.<sup>8</sup> Speaking at a cybersecurity conference in April 2018, Xi Jinping said: ‘We must not allow the internet to become a platform for disseminating harmful information and causing trouble... We must mobilize the enthusiasm of netizens and mobilize all forces to participate in [internet] governance.’ (Xinhua, 2018).

This style of moderation represented a divergence from traditional censorship methods, where arguments not in line with CCP thinking were simply removed. This new approach was in part due to the difficulty of censoring a body as massive as the internet, but also upheld a view by the country’s leadership that the internet could be a powerful tool for CCP propaganda if successfully manipulated (Bandurski, 2008: p.42).

### **Inner Workings of the Fifty Cent Party**

The Fifty Cent Party operates largely in secret and most of the information available about their inner workings comes from leaked emails and whistle-blowers. In March 2011, Chinese artist and dissident Ai Weiwei posted on his blog the transcript of a phone interview that he had conducted with a member of the Fifty Cent Party, which was quickly removed by Chinese censors. (Three months later Ai was arrested and illegally detained for three months after he tried to board a flight to Hong Kong, an incident which drew outrage from the international community).

In the interview, the internet commentator, referred to as ‘W’ told Ai that he had decided to become a member of the Fifty Cent Party as a side job after being recruited by a friend. There was no onboarding or training; each commentator was hired through connections and immediately assigned specific websites to monitor. “Generally, around 9 am every day you receive an e-mail, which basically tells you which major stories you’ll be commenting on that day. Sometimes it also tells you which website to comment on, but mostly the websites aren’t specified, and you go yourself and find relevant news. And then start commenting.” (*Ai Ai Weiwei—Love Ai Weiwei*, 2011). These emails also go into specifics on what line the Fifty Cent Party member should take: “[The emails give] instructions on which direction to guide the netizens’ thoughts, to blur their focus, or to fan their enthusiasm for certain ideas, and so on. After we’ve found the relevant articles or news on a website, we start to write articles, post, or reply to comments according to the overall direction given by our superiors.” (*Ai Ai Weiwei—Love Ai Weiwei*, 2011).

According to ‘W’ the commentators had to ‘hide their identities’ as government-hired astroturfers and coax other net users into agreeing with the party line through specific manipulation strategies. “This requires a lot of skill. You must conceal your identity, can’t write in an official manner, must write articles in many different styles, and must sometimes even have a dialogue with yourself, argue, debate, and so on. In short, you

want to create illusions to attract the attention and comments of netizens.” (*Ai Ai Weiwei*—Love Ai Weiwei, 2011). To “have a dialogue with yourself,” ‘W’ posted on article threads under a series of different usernames, each of which took on a specific role in the discussion. The first role was that of the ‘follower’, who would enter the discussion with weak arguments against the party line. Later, the ‘leader’ would enter the discussion, writing authoritatively and discrediting the earlier opinions laid down weakly by the follower. Eliciting agreement from other followers—who were all the same person—made the leader’s argument seem more credible (*Ai Ai Weiwei*—Love Ai Weiwei, 2011).

The information in this interview was corroborated by a series of leaked emails posted online by anonymous blogger ‘Xiaolan’ from the Jiangxi Province, Zhanggong District Internet Information Office. In these more than 2,700 emails, drawn from 2013 and 2014, the Zhanggong propaganda office issued daily directives to its nearly 300 hired commentators on which subjects, websites, and online users to target. Web commentators then submit reports back to the propaganda office on the threads they have commented on (Xiaolan, 2014).

One event discussed in the leaked emails that the web commentators were particularly successful at moderating was an online town hall with Shi Wenqing, a local CCP official, in 2014. Similar to the Ask Me Anything section on Reddit, where celebrities or authorities sign in and answer questions posed by the internet community, Shi was interviewed by local news website China Ganzhou Network, who asked him questions posted on a forum by net users.<sup>9</sup> In Xiaolan’s leaked emails, it was revealed that Shi had instructed web commentators to flood the forum with pre-designed questions and consequently praise his answers, in the hopes of gaining political acumen (Sonnad, 2014).

An in-depth empirical analysis of the Zhanggong District leaked emails in 2017 by Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts revealed some interesting findings (King, Pan & Roberts, 2017). The first was that 99.3 percent of the Fifty Cent Party members identified in the emails were full-time government employees, representing a concerted effort by the government at information control and unlike the internet commentator interviewed by Ai Weiwei, who had been invited into the Fifty Cent Party by a friend. Second, the postings by web commentators came in bursts at specific times throughout the day, suggesting the government had developed a coordinated strategy in responding to events that drew large online activity (King, Pan & Roberts, 2017: p.487,488). Third, the commentators exposed by the leaked emails and contacted by Jennifer Pan responded positively to questions about their work. Speaking to Foreign Policy, Pan hypothesized why the commentators she spoke with were so candid: “If you participate in online sentiment guidance, you might see yourself as someone who helps improve the general tenor of online discussions — this would not be something to be embarrassed about or ashamed of” (Wertime, 2016). This was a view shared by Ai Weiwei’s interviewee, who argued it was necessary in China for the government and

people like him to control public opinion, because of how susceptible Chinese net users are to rumours (*Ai Ai Weiwei*—Love Ai Weiwei, 2011).

A final and most important finding of the paper was that, contrary to a popular assumption put forth by the media and academics<sup>10</sup>, the Fifty Cent Party did not directly engage sceptics and redirect discussions with pro-government rhetoric, but rather shaped narratives through a method of distraction that moved conversations away from sensitive subjects. Sometimes this involved a ‘cheerleading’ strategy, whereby web commentators incite ‘positive discussions of valence issues’ (King, Pan & Roberts, 2017: p.485). The attempts of the Fifty Cent Party to engage by distraction was also corroborated by Ai Weiwei’s interviewee, who argued that net users are too savvy to be fooled simply by pro-party rhetoric. Instead, he said one strategy to redirect anger away from the government was to make himself the target of online trolling by posting inflammatory remarks. Since they post under different usernames, they mostly end up debating or condemning themselves, and actively work not to engage other net users in debate (*Ai Ai Weiwei*—Love Ai Weiwei, 2011).

## 5. THE FIFTY CENT PARTY DURING TWO “SUDDEN PUBLIC EMERGENCIES”

As previously mentioned, the Communist Party groups natural disasters, man-made accidents, protests, and public health emergencies collectively as ‘sudden public emergencies’, and works to guide public opinion in their post-disaster political spaces. Their main reactive agent to dynamically censor in real time is the Fifty Cent Party. In this section, I will introduce two examples of sudden public emergency events and show how the Fifty Cent Party responded to them.

*The Tianjin Explosions.* On August 12, 2015, about half an hour before midnight, a series of convulsive explosions ripped through Binhai New Area in Tianjin, releasing a fireball hundreds of meters into the sky. An inferno consumed the surrounding warehouses, quickly engulfing the firefighters, police, and workers who had arrived at the scene. The disaster killed an estimated 165 people, injured hundreds more, and damages were assessed to be in the billions.

Who was to blame for the incident became a hotly debated topic online (Lim, 2015). The firefighters who had responded to the fire that would ignite the explosion 40 minutes later at 11.30 pm were not told of the dangerous chemicals being stored in the warehouses and were caught unaware by the blasts. The event exposed a series of chemical mismanagement practices by the company, Ruihai International Logistics, as well as lax government oversight and corruption. The fact that dangerous chemicals were being stored so close to residential buildings was a particular point of outrage.

According to Fu Kingwa, the founder of Weiboscope—a website dedicated to tracking censorship in the PRC—the Tianjin explosions was the second most censored event of 2015 (Lim, 2015). Censorship instructions from the government were immediately issued to media outlets, ordering them to stick to official reports and not post privately

about the disaster.<sup>11</sup> The preventive censors blocked articles and certain key words like ‘explosion’, ‘rumour’, ‘truth’, and ‘boss’, while the Fifty Cent Party interjected to guide public opinion.

A study by Blake Miller and Mary Gallagher—using a profiling method detailed in an earlier paper<sup>12</sup> (Miller, 2016)—analysed Fifty Cent Party posts from a database of about 50 million comments posted to Chinese new websites in the wake of the Tianjin explosions. The posts were clear and directed, and ‘discussed firefighters and trust in government in high volume while minimizing discussion of negative or threatening opinions’ (Miller & Gallagher, 2017:p.7). Figures 1 and 2 visualize how web commentators guided discussions away from sensitive topics, like attributing blame for the disaster, instead bringing positive talking points to the forefront of online discussions. This strategy of redirecting discourse with what the authors term ‘positive energy posts’ mirrors the strategies discovered by King, Pan, and Roberts’ analysis of the leaked emails from the Zhanggong District Internet Information Office, and demonstrates guiding opinion through distraction instead of engagement, as corroborated by Ai Weiwei’s interviewee.

*Shanshan Riots.* In their analysis of the leaked Zhanggong emails, King, Pan, and Roberts identify ‘bursts’ of activity where Fifty Cent Party members under the direction of the Zhanggong District Internet Information Office post more than usual (King, Pan & Roberts, 2017: p.487, 488). These occur during or immediately before or after specific dates like national holidays, riots, highly publicized government meetings, among others, and indicate a coordinated reactive strategy by the commentators in response to particular events. Figure 3 shows these bursts over the period January 2013 to December 2014.

One event they identify as having attracted many Fifty Cent Party postings was the Shanshan riots in June 2013. Chinese state-owned news agency Xinhua reported that at around 6 am on June 26, 2013, knife-wielding mobs converged on police stations and government buildings in Lukqun, in China’s Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, and 35 people were killed in the ensuing altercation, including 11 attackers (Shang, 2013). Xinjiang is a region marked by ethnic tensions between Han Chinese and the Uighur minority population, and discussions of events in the area are closely monitored by the government.

According to the leaked email archive, in the days following the event the Fifty Cent Party members working under the Zhanggong office posted 1,100 times on online forums (King, Pan & Roberts, 2017: p.489).<sup>13</sup> The messages were primarily posted on social media websites Sina Weibo, Tencent Weibo, and the *zhongguo ganzhou wang* 中国赣州网 [China Ganzhou Network]—Zhanggong District is the administrative centre of the city of Ganzhou (Xiaolan, 2014).

Most of the posts were nationalistic, likely designed to redirect attention away from the events in Shanshan by ‘cheerleading’ for China (King, Pan & Roberts, 2017: p.489). In

one post, a user named ‘sugus’ wrote: ‘Bringing about the great revival of China is the greatest modern-day dream of the Chinese people. This dream, which reflects the long-cherished wish of the Chinese people, as well as the overall interests of the nation and the people, is the common expectation hope of every Chinese child.’ (Xiaolan, 2014). Most other posts echoed this nationalism, discussing the local economic boom in Ganzhou, calling for unity and continued growth, and expressing hope for the future of the country.

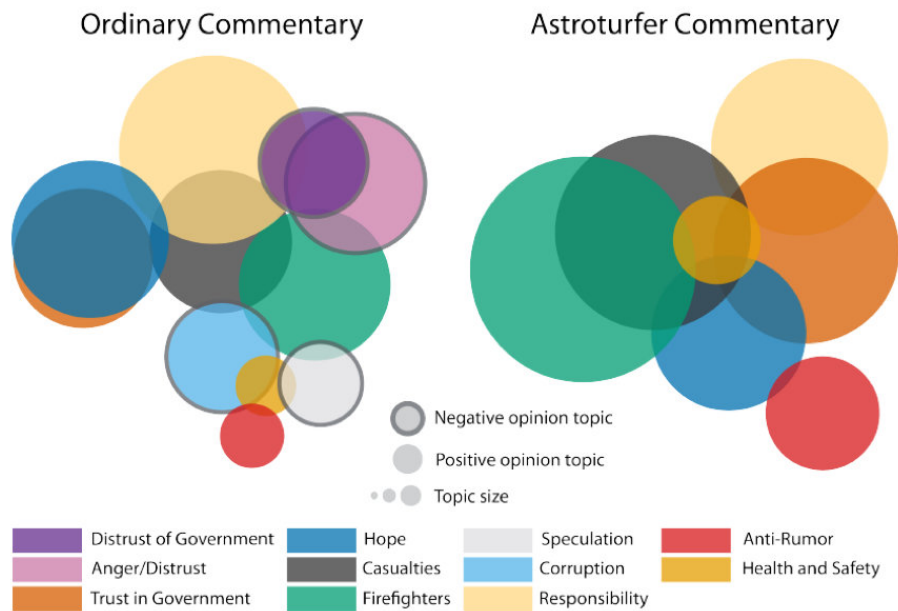
## 6. CONCLUSION

To maintain control over information flow in the internet age, the Communist Party has fostered an army of web commentators who can immediately respond to ‘sudden public emergencies’ as they unfold. This reactive form of censorship is much more dynamic than traditional, preventive models of censorship, and is especially useful to the government in moderating online discussions of sudden, unexpected events. The evidence presented in this paper—the two primary sources as well as the analyses of how the Fifty Cent Party responded to two ‘sudden public emergencies’—shows how the CCP uses the Fifty Cent Party to manipulate online discourse by trolling other net users with positive valence issues. **This builds on previous research of disaster politics, state capacity, and regime survival by demonstrating how one authoritarian government has recalibrated its censorship methods to deal with online post-disaster political spaces.**

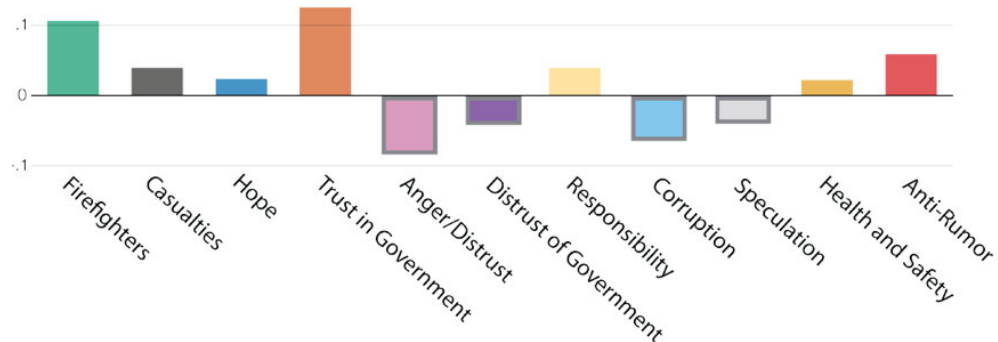
Analysing censorship in the PRC is difficult. The CCP runs an opaque government in which domestic policies are closely guarded, especially when they involve politically sensitive matter. This makes researching and drawing inferences about the Fifty Cent Party and censorship difficult. However, the adoption by the CCP of a new reactionary form of censorship has important implications, because it shows a government quickly—and arguably, successfully—adapting to new trends in the internet age.

The number of Chinese netizens is growing. In January 2017, the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) released a report stating that the country now has 731 million net users (CNNIC, 2017)—a number roughly the same as the total population of Europe—up nearly 43 million from the year before. Controlling how Chinese discuss sudden, unexpected events online requires well-rehearsed and coordinated strategies, and as the internet base continues to grow, the Fifty Cent Party will likely continue to be an important part of the government’s censorship model.

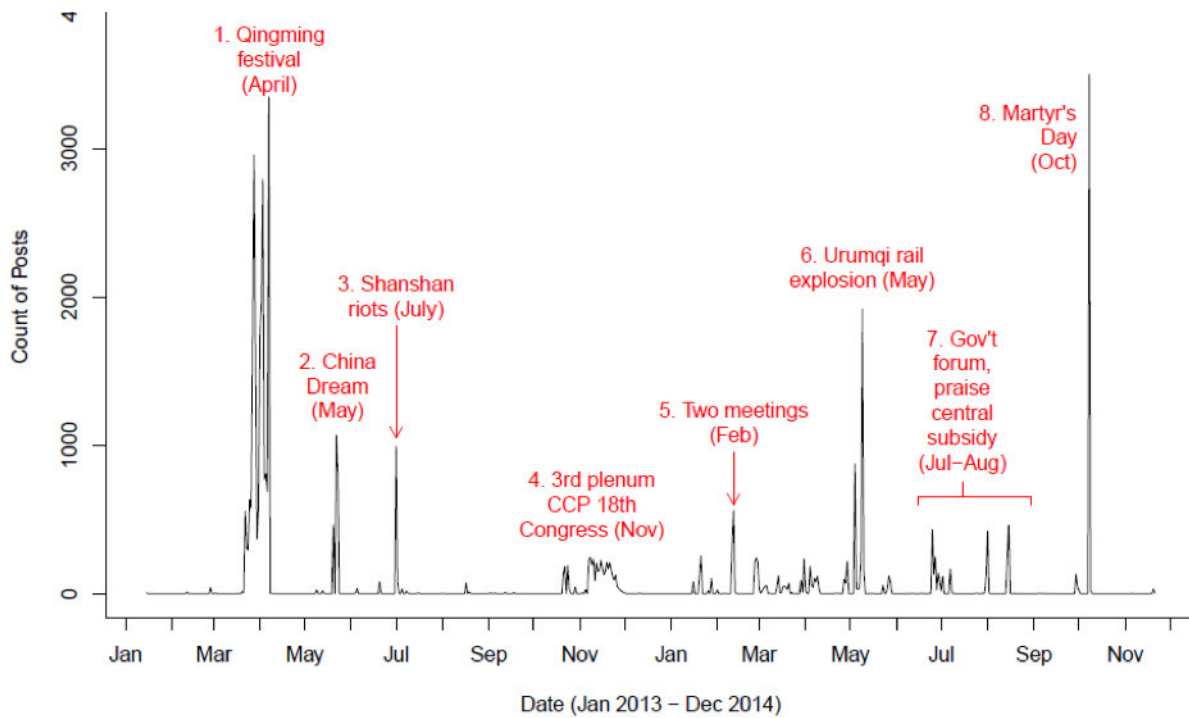




**Figure 1: Topics in Ordinary and Astroturfer Comments on the Tianjin Explosions.** *Source: Copied from Blake A. Miller and Mary Gallagher, "Astroturfing in China: Three Case Studies," Blake, February 17, 2017, [http://www.blakeapm.com/research/astro\\_report](http://www.blakeapm.com/research/astro_report).*



**Figure 2: Change in Topic Proportion from Ordinary to Astroturfer.** *Source: Copied from Blake A. Miller and Mary Gallagher, "Astroturfing in China: Three Case Studies," Blake, February 17, 2017, [http://www.blakeapm.com/research/astro\\_report](http://www.blakeapm.com/research/astro_report).*



**Figure 3: Time series of 43,757 known Fifty Cent Party social media posts, with qualitative summaries of the content of volume burst.** Source: Copied from Gary King, Jennifer Pan, Margaret E. Roberts, “How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, not Engaged Argument,” *American Political Science Review* (Forthcoming): 12.

## NOTES

1. The importance of moderating *tufa shijian wangluo yuqing* 突发事件网络舆情 [online public opinion emergencies] comes up repeatedly in Chinese journalistic and academic articles. The justification for this censorship is typically to dispel the spread of rumours and maintain a harmonious society.
2. In China, however, governments have long faced the wrath of the people after disasters strike. The Mandate of Heaven was an imperial Chinese political and religious doctrine that asserted Chinese state leaders had a divine right to rule. Natural disasters indicated displeasure from the heavens and were often interpreted as a sign that a ruler had lost their mandate to govern.
3. George W. Bush made many unnecessary blunders after Hurricane Katrina that negatively impacted his approval ratings. Instead of immediately returning to Washington DC to oversee federal response to the disaster, he instead elected to remain on vacation at his ranch in Texas. When he finally did respond, he faced severe backlash for a photo taken of him looking down on New Orleans from inside Air Force One, which critics said encapsulated his disconnectedness from the disaster. In *Disaster Policy and Politics*, Richard Sylves attributes heavy Republican losses in the Senate and the House in 2006 in part to Bush's mishandling of Hurricane Katrina. How a government manages disasters is incredibly important to maintaining credibility.
4. The Chinese government uses a combination of violent suppression, censorship, and performance legitimacy to maintain regime stability (Ong, 2015).
5. The monthly active users (MAU) of these three social networking platforms were taken from the 2017 second quarter reports of the three companies.
6. This happened in 2017 when Sixth Tone—a Chinese state-owned news agency—published an article criticizing Xinhua News Agency for releasing a racist video about Indians. Sixth Tone's article was quickly removed by Chinese censors, but was cached by journalists and shared around social media, eventually making it to the Washington Post, who wrote about the incident the following day. See Andrew deGrandpre, "Chinese state media made a racist video about India and is censoring its critics," Washington Post, August 17, 2017, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/08/17/chinese-state-media-made-a-racist-video-about-india-and-is-censoring-its-critics/?utm\\_term=.c02f270cad0e](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/08/17/chinese-state-media-made-a-racist-video-about-india-and-is-censoring-its-critics/?utm_term=.c02f270cad0e).
7. One of whom, Li Yuxiao, has gone on to become the secretary general of the Cyberspace Administration of China, China's central internet regulator, censor, oversight, and control agency.
8. These include the National Security Law (July 2015), the Counter-Terrorism Law (January 2016), Cybersecurity Law (June 2017), National Intelligence Law (June 2017), and the Draft Encryption Law (draft available as of April 2017).
9. The video of Shi Wenqing's interview is available at Ganzhou Wang, January 16, 2014, *jianchibuxiejiuzheng 'si feng' ning xin ju li cujin zhenxing* 坚持不懈纠正‘四风’凝心聚力促进振兴 [Persevere Unremittingly to Correct the 'Four Winds' to Promote Revitalization], available at: [wz.gndaily.com/2013zhuanli/1217](http://wz.gndaily.com/2013zhuanli/1217). [Accessed 23 Dec.

2018]

10. For a full literature review of these sources, see King, Pan & Roberts (2017: 485, 486).
11. These leaked directives were published by China Digital Times, see China Digital Times, August 13, 2015, *zhenli bu: tianjin tanggu kaifa qu baozha shijian* 真理部: 天津塘沽开发区爆炸事件 [Ministry of Truth: Tianjin Tanggu Development Zone Explosion Event], available at: [chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2015/08/](http://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2015/08/) 【真理部】天津塘沽开发区爆炸事件. [Accessed 23 Dec. 2018]
12. The method used metadata of the work procedures and behavioral patterns of government astroturfers to construct a profile, which was then applied to comment metadata from tens of millions of posts.
13. This number is probably higher since the archive is not all-inclusive.

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08



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