

MICRO-BLOG AND THE SPEECH ACT OF CHINA'S MIDDLE CLASS: THE 7.23 TRAIN ACCIDENT CASE

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Abstract

This article explores the impetus, processes, as well as discursive dispositions through which members of the Chinese middle class mounted a challenge against the state-owned railway system and the entire Chinese political structure in the blogosphere in the aftermath of a devastating train accident on July 23, 2011. The analysis underscored the pivotal "organic intellectual" role of journalists, lawyers, and public intellectuals in helping to construct the "class consciousness" and subjectivity of an anxious, ambivalent and insecure networked middle class in China's rapidly polarising social formation. However, not only this "stand out" collective action of the Chinese middle class was the result of many contingencies but also the apparent uniformity of their speech acts concealed deep fissures. Moreover, the naïve liberalism and anti-statist sloganeering that underpins the dominant micro-blog discourse eventually displaced and blocked any possibility for discussing and advancing the concrete processes of reforming China's state-owned system and democratising Chinese politics.

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Introduction

On 23 July 2011, two bullet train collisions occurred in a tailgate accident on a viaduct nearby Wenzhou City, Zhejiang Province. Four cars derailed, killing 40 people and injured 192. This is the first fatal accident involving China's CRH series electric multi-units trains, which has been in operation by the Ministry of Railway (MOR) since April 18, 2007 and can reach a top speed of 250 km/h. Within 10 days of the accident, Chinese netizens "have posted an astounding 26 million messages on the tragedy" (Wines and LaFraniere 2011). Most notably, micro-blogging became "a driving force in providing accurate details on the accident that conflict with official accounts" or "a popular platform to search for missing victims" (Jiao 2011), leading scholars to assert that this accident has become "a turning point in Chinese public opinion" (Liu 2011).

Although domestic and international media, scholars, and even the CCP's Central Publicity Department have paid extensive attention to this explosive spread of blog-originated public opinion, few have touched upon a fundamental question: who is the subject of this Internet-based public opinion formation? How does its configuration differ from previous cases of Internet-based controversy? As a few observers have noted, it is the middle class who spoke out vocally through micro-blogging this time. However, at a time when a unitary "class consciousness" cannot be readily attributed to the middle class, what can be the core mechanism that led this social stratum to take such a unitary speech act? Is it possible that there are divergent and countervailing currents underneath this apparent "unity"?

One thing appears immediately obvious. That is, similar to previous cases of online mobilisation, public opinion criticisms not only target exclusively at government officials and its specific institutions, namely, the MOR, but also presuppose an oppositional stand against the state. It is precisely on this basis that many scholars have equated netizens with citizens and concluded that the Internet has nurtured civil society. Based on the analysis of micro-blog texts, this paper explores the impetus and processes through which media professionals, lawyers, public intellectuals (i.e., scholars with a known profile for speaking out on public issues), celebrities in the arts and entertainment circles, as well as ordinary middle class members in various technical fields mounted their challenge against the government, thereby turning themselves from illocutionary to perlocutionary social agents.

Blogging and the "7.23 Accident" as a Turning Point of Middle Class Online Mobilisation

After Twitter was blocked in China in July 2009, Sina.com released the trial version of its Chinese equivalent, Sina Weibo (Sina Microblog), in August 2009. Sina Weibo initially limited itself to social networking functions. In early 2011, anti-regime demonstrations in the Middle East and North Africa began with blogging and tweeting and gained momentum through live webcasts, Facebook and mobile phone (Farmanfarmaian 2011). As a result, Western media started to hail social media such as Twitter and Facebook as powerful organising tools and broadcasting platforms for citizen insurrections in the Third World (Moore 2011). Cognisant of this phenomenon, rights conscious Chinese Twitter users moved en masse to Sina Weibo, constituting themselves as "the vanguard of the twitter

class.” In doing so, they turned the previously superficial medium of microblog into an exclusive platform for opposing China’s current political authoritarianism. Specifically, Sina Weibo distinguishes itself from the microblog services of China’s other Internet portals to become the favoured platform for anti-governmental social mobilisation. The higher level of politicisation by the site’s content and users dwarfs its entertainment and bulletin functions for everyday trivia, resulting in what I call the “twitterisation” of Sina Weibo.

My study of Sina Weibo content focuses on the 10 days between July 24 and August 2, 2011. Comments from the first ten pages of microblogs between the periods of 8:00-10:00, 15:00-17:00 and 22:00-24:00 on Sina Weibo’s special feature on the “7.23 Accident” were gathered, yielding a total of 7,128 items. These include two categories. About 1/6, or 1,021, consist the blogs of VIP users who register with real names and the original blogs of non-VIP users which attract more than 500 comments and 1,000 forwards. The remaining majority are made up of forwards, which can be further divided into those with or without comments. Special attention is paid to blogs that form a dialogical relationship with previous ones.

An analysis of the identities and social status of the bloggers known either directly by real names or inferred indirectly through blog content reveals the following: 1) the official blogs of certain media outlets, along with the blogs of journalists, lawyers and public intellectuals – scholar with known public profiles for speaking out on public matters – who register with real names are the primary driving force of Internet opinion. Their original blogs are widely retransmitted, constituting an anti-party-state voice that is impossible to ignore. Among these, the official microblogs of print media outlets such as “Finance Net,” “New Finance Net,” “Nanfang Weekend” and “Nanfang Metropolitan News” (“Nandu” hereafter) – respectively the market-oriented weekend and daily subsidiaries of Guangdong provincial party organ, *Nanfang Daily*, and the personal blogs of reporters and editors were most active. In this way, a selected group of media professionals, who immediately established themselves as the focal point of social attention after the accident, commanded an unprecedented level of public opinion influence. Together with lawyers and public intellectuals, they constitute the “vanguard of the twitter class.” Holding dissenting views and using the Internet to oppose the party-state’s monopoly of political power and its controlled media, this first-tier bloggers tried to bring the “fourth wave” of global democratisation into China through micro-blogging. 2) Students and the bulk of the middle class are the primary force involved in forwarding and commenting the original blogs of the first group. Without their enthusiastic promotion and amplification, the original blogs of the first group would not have the widespread influence that they commanded. Set aside blogs by students, 3,477 blogs can be attributed to members of the middle class, including white-collar professionals and technical experts, managerial and marketing professionals, as well as audio-visual media producers and cultural celebrities.¹ In the China studies literature, these social groups are considered as constituting a “new” middle class not only because of their distinctive occupational characteristics and social roles, but also because of their relationship with certain types of media. Specifically, their political consciousness and value orientations are mutually constitutive of market-oriented urban newspapers and the Internet, both of which came into being since the late 1990s in China. This relationship is the

starting point for analysing the potentialities of the middle class in transforming itself from a “class-in-itself” to a “class-for-itself,” with clear recognition of their common interests in relation to those of other social classes.

Before the “7.23 Accident,” members of the middle class had engaged in various form of “not in my backyard” type of protest movements through the new media. However, these movements were rather exclusionary, fragmented, and localised. A wide range of literature on the political orientations of China’s middle class have revealed the following: (1) they are consumption vanguards but politically rear-guarded; (2) they act as a social “stabiliser” or “buffer” and espouse a moderate and conservative ideology; (3) they collude with the party-state in a corporatist relationship; in fact, defined officially as a “middle income stratum,” they are the party-state’s chosen target for incorporation through material benefits; (4) full of anxiety and trepidation, they are unable to serve as the social agents for political democratisation (Pearson 1997; Goodman 1999; Qin 2009; Li 2010). Although the internal configuration of the middle class is complex and multi-faceted, they all intuitively wish to have more pragmatic say in the course of China’s ongoing transformation – how far, how fast, and exactly where it goes, and to what ends (Wasserstrom 2009). To the extent that they exist as a “class-for-itself,” their common class consciousness lies in their instinctive resistance against radicalism, their inclination for gradualism, as well as their support for the legitimacy of the private property that they have come to possess.

The prior “7.23 Accident” content of the 3,477 blogs clearly attributable to members of the middle class reveal clear manifestations of materialism, hedonism, self-indulgence, as well as a preoccupation with the cultivation of the entrepreneurial “self” in a competitive market society. At the same time, these bloggers opportunistically pay lip service to the presumed universalistic values of freedom, equality, and public interests by occasionally transmitting the comments of online celebrities on various social protest events, including those involving the disadvantaged lower social classes. However, they seldom contribute any comments. At most, they merely register their anger or sadness. In fact, in social protests involving China’s lower social class, including farmer land disputes and worker protests, the vocal online voices were limited to those of journalists, public intellectuals and other rights activists. Reflective of their aloofness toward protests by members of the lower social classes, the vast majority of the middle class mostly chose to remain on the sidelines or “doing nothing.”

The “7.23 Accident” changed this. Not only well-established online voices, but also the middle class of all walks unprecedentedly participated in challenging the state and politicising themselves as speech-actors. For the first time, they constituted themselves as a speech community, “the Holy with authoritative messages” (Bourdieu 1991, 55). Through the three modes of speech within the micro-blog discourse – @, forward and comment – this provisional speech community of bloggers engaged in two modes of speech acts. First, they ignored and overcame internal differences based on knowledge, information possession and discursive power to constitute themselves as a collective “I,” antagonistically addressing a “you” – the MOR and the state ownership system that it represents. Second, by imagining a unitary “we,” bloggers constituted themselves as a speech community sharing not only common consumption anxieties, lived experiences and political

insecurities, but also a common objective – to challenge the MOR and the state ownership system that it represents.

As a social stratum born out of China's market reform and integration with the global capitalism system, Western lifestyle and cultural predispositions have played a key role in shaping the social imaginaries and cultural priorities of China's middle class. In a way, they have turned Western modernity as a specific geographical and temporal entity into a universal norm (Nandy 1985, 11). As Chinese imitations of an integral part of Western middle class life, high speed and bulletin trains, with ticket prices beyond the reach of the lower social classes, targeted the middle class as primary consumers. Unlike other accidents that had triggered "not in my backyard" type of middle class protest movements before, the "7.23 Accident" became an "accident" of the entire middle class, which turns the whole country into its "backyard." Underscoring a dramatic class difference in relation to means of transportation and the respective social status and discursive power of their corresponding users, it is revealing that a long distance bus accident on the Beijing to Zhuhai highway that killed 41 people just one day prior to the "7.23 Accident" was almost completely overshadowed in the Chinese media and Internet sphere. Rather than voicing any criticisms against the well-known safety problems of a highly privatised and ill-regulated highway bus sector that primarily serves the migrant workers, the middle class expressed outrage at the MOR's poorly organised rescue efforts and its corruption to oppose state monopoly firms and redefine their relationship with the state from one of tactic complicity to one of total confrontation. Bloggers understood clearly that their perlocutionary ritual was being carried out simultaneously by tens of thousands of others whom they do not know personally, but whose presence are known (Anderson 1991, 34-36). In this way, an imaginary virtual community was formed through the performative writing of individual bloggers on the basis of a shared experience and a common temporality.

Let me now turn to the actual analysis of the 3,477 blogs. Whose imagination is being projected? Who is exerting influence? How did the middle class as a collective "we" turn Western notions into their norms and construct an antagonistic relationship with the government and the state ownership system? What are the bases for intra-middle class dialogue – political stand, value judgment or the quest for what actually happened?

Three Primary Discursive Groups and Their Dominant Role in the Discursive Hierarchy

The number of public opinion leaders is rather small in the collected micro-blog sample. These opinion leaders consist of the following three categories: leading headlines on the official blogs of specific media outlets, journalists from the Southern Newspaper Group and a few Beijing newspapers, and public intellectuals. These voices, in turn, were amplified by the vast ordinary bloggers through forwards and comments. Bloggers' challenge against the MOR reached a peak in the two days of July 28 and 29. On July 28, the blogs of *Nandu In-Depth*, the *People Weekly* of the *Nanfang Weekend*, and *Finance Net* provoked a wild wave of forwards and comments. For example, Finance Net's blog that "Wenzhou lawyers are not allowed to engage with families of bulletin train victims" garnered 9,720 comments. The blog of *People Weekly* on the "causes of the collision" received 2,667 comments. Furthermore, these

media outlets themselves – especially the presumed professionalism and investigative ethos of the Nanfang Newspaper Group as represented by Nandu – became the subject of admiration. These papers were seen as engaging in revealing the truth. On July 29, Nandu published a special feature entitled “Truth is the Best Memory,” and it immediately earned bloggers’ praises. One blogger posted the following at 8:23, July 29: “We once again see the professional integrity of Nandu.”² Below is another stringer of dialogues by various bloggers³:

A: Its impact on the Chinese media is not limited to the making of the journalist corps, but their directions (2011-2-29, 8:25).

B: A paper with ideals, commitments, character, and principles! (2011-7-29, 8:33).

C: This is what the media should uphold (2011-2-29, 8:35).

D: In a society without truth, truth is best commemoration (2011-2-29, 8:38).

E: Solute to Nandu people, the hope and inspiration of China’s media people (2011-7-29, 8:39).

F @ G: Nandu is the People’s Daily in the heart of the people (2011-7-29, 8:42).

H: Professional Commitment! Especially admirably under heavy constraints (2011-7-29, 8:46).

I @ J: Want truth, want the right to know, want social justice and fairness (2011-7-29, 8:47).

K: I will love only Nandu in the future. What is conscience? What is Justice? What is fearless in front of power! What is non-submissiveness to the almighty? What is non-submissiveness to wealth and prestige? This media outlet is it!!!!!!! Jolly Good!!! See the sparkle of freedom of speech (2011-7-29, 08:48).

L: I rarely read papers other than Nandu and other papers belonging to the Nanfang Group. Solute to the Nandu people. History will remember these names [of the Nandu people]: @Cheng Yizhong, @Xiao Shu, @ Chang Ping ... (2011-7-29, 8:48).

M: Media should be the conscience of society! //@N: I love Nandu (2011-7-29, 8:49).

O: Nandu: a paper that has earned respect during this disaster @P//@Q://@ R:I love Nandu (2011-7-29, 8:56).

S: Truth is the best commemoration:@T: Go, Nanfang Go! (2011-7-29, 8:56).

These comments construed an image of Nandu as a rebel against repressive politics, emphasising “only truth, not opinion,” thus creating a delicate tension with the official narrative of the accident. After July 27, news about how a CCTV producer was removed from job due to reporting on the “7.23 Accident” and how

the CCP's Central Publicity Department had tightened up control of public opinion began to spread wildly in the micro-blog sphere, leading bloggers to intensify their support of their favoured journalists:

A: Speechless!//@B: Where is justice? (2011-8-2, 13:19)

C: Is this the Communists' freedom of speech? How sad to be a Chinese. The ordinary people do not even have the right to speak ... (2011-8-2, 10:57)

D: This is the highest honour of China's media people! //... @E: Not allowing people to speak at all? Why on the earth a price has to be paid for speaking a word of fairness on behalf of the dead? (2011-7-29, 16:47)

E: If even media outlets that speak out for the people were shut up, then there is no way for people to see the future (2011-7-29, 16:45).

Meanwhile, the Hong Kong media became important news sources. In a typical case of borrowing external power to strike at an internal power, many bloggers invoked news by TVB, Mingpo and other Hong Kong news outlets to express their frustration and disappointment with the MOR, as well as their outrage against it. Furthermore, Hong Kong's public servant system and its political institutions became the normative points of reference in criticisms against political corruption and MOR monopoly in favour of privatisation on the mainland. For example, commenting on a previous blog praising the efficiency and public service orientation of the Hong Kong public service system, one blogger wrote, "On the mainland, public servants are masters, the ordinary people are servants. In Hong Kong, public servants are genuine public servants, and they do not have a master mentality" (Anew4, 2011-7-30, deleted by now). Another blogger put it on July 31: "On so many occasions, Hong Kong, because of you, there is warmth and hope. Thank you, Hong Kong!"⁴

The MOR as the Targets of Criticism and the Search for Truth

The focal points of criticisms in the 3,477 blogs includes: concealment of the list of the fatal victims, the reason for burying the wrecked train carts at the accident site, the political motivations for the construction of the bulletin and high speed trains, and finally, the MOR's corruption. A blog by "Citizen Party Member" on July 28 was most eloquent in this regard:

Derailed are not bulletin trains, but the system; buried are not train carts, but truth; burned are not bodies, but people's trust; covered up are not mistakes, but crimes! When people are so helpless in front of extreme corruption and the corrupted institutions of this country, we must wake up the people's intelligence, making them more clear-headed, think more independently, and unit them to protect our rights and interests!!! (forwards 472; comments 113, 2011-7-28, deleted by now).

At 9:20, July 29, another blog offered an inter-textual reinforcement:

@A: inaction in political reform and accelerated economic reform lead to further lopsidedness @B@C@Liu Junning: Anti-liberalisation means that the Anti-Rightist Campaign [of 1957] is still ongoing; the rush to build the High

Speed Railway means that the Great Leap Forward [of 1958] is still leaping forward; singing red songs means the Cultural Revolution is still ongoing, and the very existence of the MOR means that the plan economy is still on the go! In short, China still marches on the extended path of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and the Plan Economy! To bid farewell to this line, start with abolishing the MOR! ...

This blog forwarded well-known liberal political scholar Liu Junning's July 26 original blog on "abolishing the MOR," which attracted 6,948 forwards and 1,541 comments. Here, a number of equivalences were being established: The MOR equals monopoly, state enterprises and plan economy; high-speed and bullet train equals the Great Leap Forward; Anti-liberalisation equals the Anti-rightist Campaign; red songs equals the Cultural Revolution; bidding farewell to the plan economy and abolishing the MOR equal privatisation and marketisation. In the end, this was further elevated to an attack on the "China model," which counts China's high-speed railway as one of its most quaint-essential manifestation.

The middle class's overwhelmingly dominant and deictic discursive relationship vis-à-vis the MOR and the state-ownership system in the blog sphere is predicated upon the virtual absence of the latter. In this case, a virtually constituted "we" shouted out aloud across cyberspace at a faceless and static bureaucratic "you" – the MOR. Because of the "organic intellectual" role played by journalists and public intellectuals, members of the middle class equated marketised mainland media and the Hong Kong media with progress, democracy, truth, and juxtaposed them with state-ownership and party media, which are equated with totalitarian control, falsehood, and manufactured opinion. A whole series of naïve dichotomies that had been in circulation in the writings of neoliberal intellectuals and the market-oriented media since the 1990s – society versus government, market versus state, citizen rights versus political control, individual versus collective, democracy versus party-state authoritarianism – were conveniently transplanted to the discursive relationship between the middle class and the MOR. A distinctive middle class belief system was in formation. Calls for abolishing the MOR and privatising railway operations, and for fact-seeking through alternative means, became vocal and thunderous.

It should be noted that there exists left and liberal, and even neo-liberal distinctions in political orientation within middle class opinion leaders. However, liberal and neoliberal public intellectuals and journalists clearly constituted the "mainstream." It appears that their notions of political liberalism and procedural democracy resonated with netizens' frustrations with Chinese political institutions. There were more neutral, even pro-system voices in the print media; however, these voices were clearly in the minority; moreover, they were viciously attacked by bloggers. For example, on July 25, the *People's Daily's* market-oriented subsidiary *Global Times* published a commentary entitled "High Speed Railway is the Necessary Pain of the Chinese." Shortly afterwards, the Ministry of Civic Affairs affiliated newspaper *Public Interest Times* published an article about how the rescue efforts of the "7.23 Accident" demonstrated the "superiority of socialism." These two articles instantly provoked a wave of outrage in the blogosphere. Verbal abuses were directed personally at Hu Xijing, the editor-in-chief of *Global Times*. In the eyes of these bloggers, Hu, in an attempt to please his political masters, has lost his

sense of humanity, becoming shameless and coldblooded. Moreover, Hu's point that he felt bitterness for the negative consequence of foreign media publicity of the accident on China's high-speed highway export was being rearticulated and subverted: "bitterness is good – this means that we won't shame ourselves abroad because of our corruption" (A-Ivan, 2011-7-27, 11:40).

Rather than identify with Hu, bloggers not only assumed the position of the foreign media, but also took a paternalistic attitude to lecture on and even mocked Hu. Most spectacularly, MOR spokesman Wang Yongping's pathetic and stupidly worded rambling at a news conference that "believe it or not, I believe it anyway" after offering the official explanation for the hurried burial of the head of the wrecked train as a support base for rescue effort so irritated the bloggers that they quickly expropriated it, making it the hottest meme on the Chinese Internet. Bloggers seized this idiotic expression to develop a "high-speed railway style" that relentlessly attacked and mocked official discourses. As Judith Butler puts it, it is precisely the expropriability of the dominant and authorising discourse that constitutes one potential site of its subversive resignification (1997, 157). The three modes of @, forwards and comments in the blog sphere progressively connected up and multiplied the voices of the dispersed bloggers all over the country, emboldening them to believe that they could deliberately deploy their speech acts to challenge and undermine the existing political order. A new and seemingly self-evident political and moral order began to solidify in the hearts and minds of middle class bloggers.

It is on the basis of this assumed order that we can understand why so many members of the middle class so willingly responded to the calls of their intellectual vanguards for dividing up or abolishing the MOR and privatising the railway system. As already mentioned in the previous discussion, despite internal debates, journalists from market-oriented media, public intellectuals and lawyers formed a powerful discursive alliance. Journalists, for their part, tirelessly followed up, probed, reported and exposed all kinds of scandals and inside stories about the MOR. Concurrently, legal scholars and lawyers initiated the "abolishing the MOR" action in the blog sphere. On July 25, independent current affairs observer Chen Jieren posted a blog entitled "repeated accidents prove that the MOR must be abolished" (2011-7-25, 22:57), calling upon the immediate abolishment of the MOR, the transferring of its supervisory functions to the Ministry of Transportation, as well as the corporatisation of its operations. Well-known legal authority He Jinsong forwarded this blog, which was then repeatedly redisplayed, forwarded and commented on, forming a mutually reinforcing meaning producing and value-sharing inter-textual chain of signification.

In doing so, the bloggers also formed an implicit discursive alliance with elite voices within the ruling political class seen to be on their side. On July 28, Premier Wen Jiabao visited the accident site and held a news conference. In the absence of CCTV live broadcast of the news conference, Sina Weibo provided live webcast. Deviating from the typical anti-government and anti-authority frame, the bloggers viewed Premier Wen as belonging to "our" side in an irreconcilable conflictual relationship with the MOR as "you." Further, they expressed sympathy for Wen's presumed "isolation" and "exclusion" from the ruling Politburo. In this view, although the Premier is blameless both in his attitude and his speech, "the conserva-

tives within the system and the renegades are still firmly in control of the regime” (forwards 1,699; comments 454, 2011-7-28, 13:30). Hong Kong University Professor Qian Gan issued a similar blog: “... please be in the shoes of this sick old man. He is not truly at himself. He suffers from various constraints ... what else can you expect from him? ... (forwards 10,173; comments 3,223, 2011-7-28 13:44).

This is highly significant. Here, the MOR is seen as more powerful than that of Premier Wen. Portrayed as a lonely and frail old man, Wen is seen as having done his best, despite “the whole platoon of individuals behind him, who were the true pillars of the state” (A, 2011-7-28, 13:41). Another blogger put it: “in this party-state bureaucratic system, if you ask whether a Premier has the power to dismiss a minister, the answer is no. It is beyond imagination to shake up the power of bureaucratic capital” (forwards 630; comments 150, 2011-7-28, deleted by now).

Anti-neoliberal or left-leaning voices are much weaker in comparison. On July 26, anti-liberal public intellectual He Xin posted two consecutive blogs to link with his blog essay, “money worship and marketisation ruined the railway and ruined China.” However, there were few followers and responses (forwards 81; comments 45). Of left-leaning voices, only Beijing University Professor Kong Qingdong’s call for the firing of the MOR’s main responsible persons was widely forwarded and commented on between July 26 and 27. Thus, neoliberal and anti-neoliberal scholars formed an apparent unity on the standpoints of critiquing the MOR’s cover-up of the accident and its perceived negligence during the rescue efforts. However, this unity broke down on solutions. There are profound differences between these two camps on whether to dismantle the MOR and privatise railway operations. Moreover, a number of journalists and public intellectuals took a more nuanced view of the MOR. They also made distinctions between the MOR as a state-owned system, its high-level officials, and its rank and file workers. For example, a July 31 “front page” blog by the *Huaxi Metro News* cited Deputy MOR Minister Lu Dongfu as saying that accusations against the MOR for failing to prioritise rescuing the victims deeply hurt the more than 2,000 railway workers and many others on the rescue frontline (forwards 1,755; comments 722, 2011-7-31, 11:48). In the responses, bloggers belittled MOR officials and acknowledged rescuing workers as “heroes” in a typical “officials versus the people” framework. Nevertheless, this willingness to accept the positive role of MOR workers did not extend to any willingness to acknowledge the positive social function of the MOR. Thus, when *Global Times* editor-in-chief Hu Xijiang posted a blog on August 2 to say that the MOR had ensured the cheap mobility of the Chinese population and goods, he was immediately being accused for defending a state-ownership system that has become the hotbed for corruption and selfish profiteering. Furthermore, bloggers typically conflated bulletin trains with high speed trains. Exactly how this happened was hard to trace. However, many foreign media outlets explicitly referred this bulletin train accident as a “high speed train accident.” Although bulletin trains (*dongche*) are high speed trains in the generic sense, high-speed train (*gaotie*) designates a more specific category of trains that uses different technology and runs on separate tracks in China. Clear distinctions are made in both official and everyday usages. However, this distinction became blurred for the first time in Chinese public discourse in the blog sphere over the “7.23 Accident.” Because domestic bloggers often cited foreign media as sources, it is possible that foreign media have ended up playing

a primary defining role in shaping not only the naming of the accident, but also partly setting the agenda of the discussion by making China's High Speed Railway the target of criticisms in the blog sphere.

Bloggers' Appeals to Civil Society and Their Liberal Democratic Imaginations

Bloggers deployed various rhetoric strategies and mobilised variegated symbolic resources to convey their outrage against the MOR, to show their sympathy for the victims, as well as to project their understanding of current Chinese political reality and their alternative political visions. Of most significant here is their overwhelming embrace of an either/or dichotomy between China and the West/U.S. An August 1 blog is rather typical in this regard:

In the U.S., anybody can operate a television station except the government. In the U.S., you can find all kinds of newspapers and journals except "party papers and party journals"; in the U.S., anybody can have a "little-third" (extramarital lover) except government officials. In the U.S., anybody can keep their income confidential except government officials. In the U.S., people can live, breathe and express their discontent freely except that the government has no freedom and is locked in a cage (forwards 877; comments 253, 2011-8-1, 6:43).

Implicit in this blog is a series of political assumptions and a whole discursive framework about China and the United States. First, many bloggers hold a particular notion about the legitimacy of modern government. A July 27 blog by a user named "Anger of the Grassroots" wrote the following in respond to another blogger:

Because your truth resonates with me, I have paid attention to you! Carry on!!!@ Chinese Liberal Fraction 2: the Definition of Modern Legitimate Government: obtain majority approval through universal poll and the power to govern. That which came out of the barrel of gun is called a regime – it can be a bandit regime, a hooligan regime, but it is not a government //@A: all those governments that have not passed an open election, without a Constitution or with only an illegitimate Constitution, are all illegal!

@B: "Revolution": The purpose of revolution is emancipation from serfdom, leading to freedom. Revolution first means to revolutionise old notions, further leading to revolutionise minds and institutions. All these, however, must start from truth-seeking. In a society that is full of absurdities and lies, to speak truth is revolutionary! The revolution of speaking truth is the lowest-cost revolution. A society that forbids people from speaking the truth can expect a revolution of blood and fire that will destroy everything! The first truth: the party-state is an illegal regime! (forwards 59; comments 27, 2011-7-27, deleted by now).

The above is a typical intertextual dialogue in the blog sphere. After several rounds of forwards, the various blogs connect up with each other to form a consistent and mutually reinforcing meaning production chain. Here, netizens' Schumpeterian understanding of democracy as a means to produce government has become the basis for the complete negation of the current Chinese political

system. Procedural democracy has replaced the revolutionary party-building and state-making theory that Mao derived from practical struggles; liberal constitutionalism has replaced the party-state's own claim to political legitimacy. Let's look at another chain of blogs:

@A: //@B://@C://@D:we live in such a country.

@E:@F: a strong and powerful state won't be subverted even if it allows open gun ownership; a weak regime requires real name registration even for a kitchen knife; under a humanistic government, the President will read out the name of every victims, under an ice-cold government, the number of victims are high secrets to be concealed; in a free country, a reporter can grill a cabinet minister to sweating; in a restrictive system, an official can tell reporters, believe it or not?! (forwards 116; comments 32, 2011-7-26, deleted by now).

Without even the need of spelling out the contrasting sides, an imaginary Western paradigm serves as the internalised normative framework in the middle class collective speech action.

Second, the middle class called forth a citizen identity and demanded the transition from "the people" to "modern citizen." On July 30, Chen Yan at the Editorial Office of Qilu Television issued the following blog:

Please do not call us the people, please uniformly call us citizens! The people exist under government officials; they are the weaker group in a hierarchy, and the enslaved group! However, all under the heaven are citizens with equal rights and responsibilities, with their own basic ethical standards. They respect rights but also seek freedoms. They have compassionate hearts and fulfil citizenship responsibilities! (forwards 268; comments 73, 2011-7-30, 23:15).

On July 31, "comments on China" issued a blog in the form of a quasi-public opinion survey: "China has a huge population, but few Chinese; China has a huge number of people, but few citizens," what do you think? (forwards 173; comments 61, 2011-7-31 23:08)

The forwards and comments of the above two bloggers more or less agree with their basic premise, stressing citizenship and civil society as not only "the means of resisting tyranny and authoritarian domination," but also as a "self-evident end" (Deng 2006, 6), a universal norm beyond the constraints of time and space. On July 30, a long blog issued by "Trash Teng" entitled "Ten Suggestions for Each Ordinary but Persistent Citizen to Be" garnered 19,308 forwards and 4,181 comments. Nothing demonstrates more evidently the middle class bloggers' embracing of citizenship identity and their admiration for the virtues, institutions, and objectives of citizenship:

What can we do? Below are 10 suggestions for contemporaries:

1. Do all one can to participate or organise your trusted environmental or educational NGO – NGO is the hope of civil society.

2. Learn and spread the most basic citizenship knowledge ... a modern democratic society cannot be rooted in a country permeated with lackey consciousness.

3. *Encourage friends to use new communication tools ... the free transmission of information is the basis for promoting change.*

4. *Express the necessary anger on public events ...*

5. *Learn about true history beyond official propaganda.*

6. *During the outbreak of a public event, do you best to spread the truth you have learned, including using the low-risk "forward" function.*

7. *Support and encourage those sharing your common cause.*

8. *Do not buttress tyranny ... institutions can change individuals, individuals can also change institutions.*

9. *... Never give up hope, patiently wait for the opportune moment for change ...*

10. *If you agree with above, please forward; if not, offer criticism or suggestions (2011-7-30, 21:32).*

This inspirational embrace for liberal citizenship is not unrelated to the lived experience of the middle class born out of the post-1992 era. This was the group that has been able to mobilise their technical expertise as "soft capital" to participate in the market competition and secure their "comparative advantage" in the post-1992 period of rapid social stratification and class polarisation. At the same time, this group has been deeply influenced by the Western ethos of professionalism. They have a very strong rights and legal consciousness, as well as a strong desire for sharing political power, trying to appropriate the West's historical experience to make themselves society's "mainstream" (Gene Louis Roca 2008).

It is precisely on the above basis that journalists, lawyers and public intellectuals have been able to tap into this middle class' instinctive frustration and their fractured relationship with the government in the aftermath of the bulletin train accident to turn their naïve and dichotomous intelligence about civil society, free speech, democracy, and political rights into highly inflammatory "performative writing" symbols. The effectiveness of their "perlocutionary" acts manifests not only in their uproarious critique against the government, but also in their successful addressing of the political and economic vulnerabilities of a middle class that has quickly denigrated into the "lower-middle class" shortly after its rise. It is precisely on the above basis that we can understand why the middle class dramatised the antagonistic relationship between state and society. In doing so, they adopted a rhetorical strategy that conflates corrupted MOR officials with the MOR itself and advocates its thoroughgoing privatisation and marketisation. Moreover, they took this strong neoliberal-oriented option as the only path of salvation for China's railway without paying any attention to the dire consequences of railway privatisation in the U.K. and other countries. It is also precisely on the above basis that we can understand why online left-leaning voices have been persistently restricted and contained, and why liberal and neoliberal voices have been so boisterous in labelling online leftist voices as the party of "fifty cents" – i.e. the government's mercenary propagandists. It is also on this basis that we can appreciate the legitimacy and more importantly, exclusivity in middle class fixation and anger over the bulletin train accident without concurrently extending any concern over the bus crash the

day before. Evidently, the civil society and constitutional governance ideals that the middle class adhere to are not inclusive notions that cover all social strata. At most, it seems that they are the “public” means by which the liberal and neoliberal elites and their middle class followers mobilise themselves to oppose China’s existing political system in the pursuit of elite rule.

Not surprisingly, it is also precisely on this basis that a number of middle class bloggers have been self-reflective of their individual role and collective actions, their own selfishness, their cynicism, as well as their complicity in being incorporated by the existing order. On July 28, “New Fortune Magazine” posted the following blog:

We hate corrupt officials, but we rash to take the public service entrance exam; we curse [state] monopoly, but we try all means to take positions in highly paid [state] monopoly firms; we abhor unfairness, but we busy ourselves with finding guanxi in moving ahead. In short, we are indignant ... not because we want to eliminate unfairness, but because we want to place ourselves in advantageous positions in unfair situations. This deeply rooted selfishness is what needs to be reflected upon most profoundly (forwards 4719; comments 996, 2011-7-28, 0:22)

On the same day, the executive editor of a lifestyle magazine posted a similar blog:

The high-speed railway event should wake up the middle stratum: a social stratum that should have played the role of being the social conscience, moral defender and freedom promoter have so far willingly avoided and kept silent on social problems and political reform in China. Taking holidays in small islands and shopping for brand name goods have become the middle class label, as if we ourselves can secure a little paradise in a brutal society. Yes, the victims of high-speed railway all have good incomes. So what? Their humble status means that they are not much dignified than the vendors who are being beaten up by urban order enforcers (forwards 2406; comments 410, 2011-7-28, 12:10).

Both blogs were concerned with the social function of the middle class as a stabiliser and a buffer. They both called upon members of the middle class to overcome their aloofness in public life. However, it is clear that cynicism still prevails and the economic calculations of the middle class make the belief in freedom, citizenship responsibility, and public action hollow. The following blog is most revealing:

I myself am angry, But I have a house and a car and a job and I'd be worried that if I protested I would lose all this and not be able to protect my family. Under those circumstances, would you confront a tank? (Moore 2011).

Rumour Mongering and Counter-Rumour Mongering, Rumour-Busting and Anti-Rumour Busting as the Radicalisation of Past Left-Right Debates

The “7.23 Accident” raised questions regarding the rationale for the construction of High-Speed Railway system, the MOR’s decision to bury the wrecked train engine on the spot, the number of death, as well as the performance of high-level

MOR officials at the rescue spot. The apparently oppositional positions among party-organs, marketised media, reporters, as well as netizens on these issues led to the rise of rumours in the blog-sphere. All of a sudden, factual reports, grapevine news, and rumours all mixed together, rendering it impossible to distinguish truth from falsehood. Consequently, some bloggers set up a voluntary “rumour busting alliance” account in the blog sphere; later on, Sina Weibo opened up a special “blog rumour busting” account. These accounts, online leftists, and liberal and neoliberal elites ended up engaging in many rounds of debates on rumour and counter-rumour, rumour-busting and anti-rumour busting. In doing so, these debates extended previous controversies between the left and the right and displaced the search for truth.

On June 26, a quarrel broke out between An Chongmin, Deputy Director of the Press Office of Deyang City, Sichuan province, and Zhao Chu, a military affairs expert. This resulted from An’s following blog on the same day: “Finally, one sentence to those who maliciously manufacture rumours and relentlessly try to borrow external force to realise their objectives: the Chinese people, Chinese citizens, including a Communist Party that tries to reform itself, will not let you get your way” (An Chongmin, 2011-7-26 23:39). This provoked 378 comments, all targeting at An for propping up the government and willingly serving as its hired gun. Below is the dialogue between Zhao Chu and An Chongmin:

Zhao Chu: Don’t presume that you are living in Alice’s Wonderland just because you are a ranked, though lowly, official. You are ridiculous and laughable. The forces that maliciously try to bring down your Party are not where you say they are; rather, perhaps they are at your next door. I believe you know better who is bringing down this state. If you indeed do not know, then this demonstrates that the god you try to support deserves to fall (2011-7-26, 23:52).

An Chongmin: Reply@Zhao Chu: I don’t know how did you acquire your credentials as an expert? Don’t you collect a salary from this state? Aren’t you being made an expert by the media of this system? I may have a humble life, but I should still be able to speak freely. Perhaps you have manufactured malicious rumours? Or else? (2011-7-26, 23:58)

Zhao Chu reply @ An Chongmin: My work is worthy my salary, and worthy my country. If you would rather continue to play your role as a hero, I won’t block. But be careful of being busted (2011-7-27, 0:02).

Clearly, both sides are aware of each other’s positions. An Chongmin’s “politically correct” position incited netizens’ fanatic attacks, questioning whether the CCP as a governing party still represents the general interests of the people and whether it has been denigrated into a state bureaucratic apparatus for the perpetuation of its self-interest. Debates of this nature were everywhere in the blog sphere. Interestingly, Wu Jiaxiang, a domestic liberal intellectual, had made the following remarks on Sina’s “Blog Rumour Busting”:

Wu Jiaxiang: I suggest Sina Weibo to remove its so-called “rumour busting” official blog. The premise of this blog is wrong, as it assumes that there are those who intentionally make rumours. In fact, even if there are, they are the

fifty-cent party, and how do you dare to bust them? Ordinary bloggers, in an attempt to attract eyeballs, may exaggerate some events or comments, but these cannot be viewed as rumour-mongering. So long as the space for free speech is opened up, the exaggerated parts will bust themselves as a blown-up bubble ... (forwards 1488; comments 998, 2011-7-13, 10:52).

Here, rumour mongering is being attributed to the “fifty-cent party.” Moreover, the definition of rumour is being narrowed to exclude exaggeration. Following a same logic, liberal media elites such as Cheng Yizhong and Lan Gongzi posted blogs that promote the significance of rumour-mongering for free speech:

Cheng Yizhong: In a country where there is no guarantee for speech freedom and where the media are seriously restrained, rumour is actually the truth inside people’s hearts, a means of expressing popular will, as well as a powerful weapon of the masses against official propaganda and lies. It is not factual, but it is more truthful than facts; it cannot withhold scrutiny, but it is always more convincing than the truth; it has all kinds of loopholes, but it cannot resist the mass’s deep belief in it. At the present, it is not that the rumour stops to the wise. It will only stop to free speech (forwards 2775; comments 919, deleted and updated on 2011-9-2).

Lan Gongzi: Making and spreading rumour is a basic citizenship right. The precondition for this is that there is no way to find the truth. Under such a circumstance, rumour itself is the weapon that compels the emergence of truth. Each round of transmission propels a step closer to truth, until the truth appears. This is a full ecological system. Do not make harsh demands on the Internet and micro-blogs. To punish rumour transmission by closing [Internet] accounts is a form of terror. It brutally takes away people’s right to question ... rumour dies at openness and transparency (forwards 953; comments 248, 2011-7-23, 2:07).

It is worthwhile to note that middle class netizens do not one-sidedly embrace these elite liberal positions. Below are some example of debates between “Lan Gongzi” and netizens:

Blogger A: No, rumour making and rumour spreading are not a basic right. Nor is it the same as questioning. To question is no doubt a good thing. But one cannot rely upon irresponsible remarks and rumours to compel truth. Making either glorifying or demonising rumours are both reflective of Goblins’ mode of thinking, not the essence of news (2011-7-23, 2:14).

Blogger B: reply@Blogger A: What do you think is rumour? When rulers call you rumour making you are rumour making (2011-7-23, 2:16).

Blogger A: reply@Lan Gongzi: Whether it is rumour or not depends on the truth. There is no other criterion other than this ... neither glorifying rumours nor demonising rumours are constructive (2011-7-23, 2:20).

In the eyes of “Lan Gongzi” and Cheng Yizhong, rumours can and should lead to the positive and cumulative effect of undermining political authoritarianism. In this sense, it is a “counter-power,” “the first free broadcasting station” (Jean-Noel Kapferer 1997, 14-20). Here, because “the system” equals a rumour machine, rumours become the means of resistance. There is a causal relationship between the

two. Rumour mongering, in the name of “free speech,” is a “basic” citizenship, propelling and compelling the system to open up and become transparent. Opponents acknowledged the government’s malfunction and inaction, but emphasised that individuals such as Cheng Yizhong had conflated the system’s lack of transparency with rumour itself. They asserted that it is necessary to differentiate rumour from queries and criticisms, and that rumour-mongering should not be the “routinised” form of criticising the government, because it is not conducive for truth-finding.

This debate over rumours resulting from the “7.23 Accident” both amplifies and deepens the divisions between the left and right camps which have emerged in China’s intellectual and media spheres since the mid-1990s. On the one hand, liberal elites used the system’s failure to defend the legitimacy of rumours. Moreover, they deliberately dramatised rumour-mongering as a collective action. There is a clear populist tendency in their insistence that rumour-mongering has a positive social function in a country with press censorship and during the times of public crisis. On the other hand, left-leaning online voices such as Wu Fatian, Sima Nan, Liu Yang, and Wang Xiaodong debunked the basic formulations of “freedom for rumour-mongering = freedom of speech,” “rumour>truth, rumour>facts.” They challenge the legitimacy of rumours from the perspective of its potentially unpredictable effects on democratic system building, ethical construction, and social stability. In short, one can conclude that debates over whether “rumour-mongering is good or bad” took the ongoing public debates between the left and right intellectual camps to a new height. Middle class bloggers took sides on the debate. At the same time, it is clear that liberal elite’s “a marketplace of free opinion” model toward rumours – that is, the belief that truth will emerge by itself – proves to be utopian. In fact, the fact that the eight major rumours about the “7.23 Accident” went viral proves otherwise. Moreover, instead of getting closer to truth, rumours led to collective polarisation. Given this, Hu Yanping’s July 26 blog, which still defends rumours, is particularly worthwhile pondering:

Hu Yanping: Iron rules regarding truth of blogs:

1. *Blog is the grinder machine of rumours, not its originating site.*
2. *The biggest rumour does not come from the people.*
3. *Blogs that have been proven false cannot easily rise again.*
4. *Real name registration is not most crucial. Speaking truth is.*
5. *Blogs are neither amplifier nor catalyst, they only restore to the original state of affairs.*
6. *One blog alone may not be comprehensive, but forwards and comments will lead to comprehensiveness.*
7. *Collective wisdom is closer to truth than individual information.*
8. *Reality is dirty; do not expect blog to be pure (forwards 47,473; comments 8381, 2011-7-26, 23:02)*

As the large number of forwards of the above blog demonstrates, the aroused emotions of the middle class and MOR led them to be more willing to forward and comment information and rumour that resonates with their feelings, judg-

ments, and understanding, so as to further reinforce their pre-existing views and positions. While left-leaning online scholars and some ordinary bloggers willingly participated in rumour busting, liberal elites took the opposition direction – countering rumour-busting: they either mocked it or even promoted the originating, development, and flourishing of rumours.

Conclusion: Naïve Liberalism and the Outburst of Middle Class Consciousness

In the Internet debate and even rumour-mongering over the “7.23 Accident,” China’s middle class embarked on a collective speech-act for the first time by making use of the politically relative safe micro-blog. Through blogging, they challenged officials and the state-owned system and flashed their imaginaries about civil society and liberalism. An accident that involves a public service catering almost exclusively to the middle class naturally led to their “not in my backyard” type of concern for their own safety and economic interests. The interconnected nature of the train turns the whole nation into the backyard of the middle class. Moreover, this was precisely the moment when micro-blog just emerged as a social networking platform for the middle class to make their distinctions from the lower social classes in consumption and lifestyle patterns. Under the guidance of journalists, lawyers, and public intellectuals as the “vanguard of the twittering class,” the middle class engaged in performative writing that absorbs and internalises prevailing ideological predispositions and shares their common anxieties, frustrations, and value orientations. In this way, they constituted a provisional and mutually supportive social network. In the end, the middle class made micro-blog their de facto means of communicating with the government. However, this “stand out” collective action was the result of many contingencies or a consternation of various fragile, unstable and unpredictable factors. Moreover, the apparent uniformity conceals deep fissures.

First, this micro-blog-based speech action does not register the internal economic stratification of the middle class in real life. To begin with, the cumulative speech-act power and networked social capital of the journalists, lawyers and public intellectuals prior to the “7.23 Accident” allowed them to become discursive leaders in the micro-blog sphere. Other members of the middle class, meanwhile, constituted a secondary dialogic relationship with them through forwards and comments. This is a dependency relationship in both the emotive and conceptual senses. Then, a further dominant/marginal relationship exists within the discursive leader stratum’s speech-acts. This is a division of different political perspectives. However, it is significant that the first layer dialogical relationship between the middle class as a whole and their questioning and blaming of the MOR overshadowed and concealed the complex and overlapping internal discursive power relations and differences both within the opinion leaders and the broader middle class as a whole.

Second, it is clear that the dominant ideas, concepts, values and intelligence that the middle class displayed and took pleasure to share through the “7.23 Accident” fall into the track of “liberalism” or even “neoliberalism.” They not only elated their anti-MOR position to anti-government, anti-party and anti-existing political system positions, but also enthusiastically embraced liberal elites’ call for dismantling the MOR and privatising its operations. Furthermore, they firmly

believed that gradual reform is no longer enough in solving the problems of the state-ownership system, and they assumed that only privatisation and complete marketisation will rescue and emancipate middle class life from repressive political tyranny. Following the Lockean three way civil-society-economy-state model, they believed in the existence of a self-regulating and autonomous economy outside state and government. In this view, such an economy serves as the only basis for nurturing a free, autonomous and self-deciding citizenry. Such a citizenry, in turn, will question the primacy of the political structure in accordance with its own social position. In all these imaginings, Western-style electoral democracy and free speech emanated an indisputable aura, serving as the core of middle class intelligence and moral destination, as well as an effective weapon in the discursive politics of self-empowerment vis-à-vis the Chinese state.

Third, it is clear that a majority of the middle class desire legal means to restrain and limit the party state's control over market/marketisation and civil society. However, internal economic stratification and differential access to political power, especially the downward mobility of the middle class in the past decade due to the contraction of economic opportunities, inflation, and rising housing prices have posed a profound challenge for a "middle-class agenda whose top priority is striving for institutionalisation and ideological (or constitutional) justification for capitalism" (Chen 2002) so as to politically secure their everyday life and commercial activities. At the same time, through their fetish of the Western urban middle class lifestyle, they help to sustain existing social stratification through taste and culture, while selectively, tactically, and calculatedly maintaining an ambivalent relationship with the bottom strata of society. On the one hand, their elitism serves to suppress any possibility for populist politics. On the other hand, they occasionally slide into the populist trap themselves both in their opportunistic resistance against political authoritarianism and official corruption and their demands for political reform. It is precisely under such a circumstance that journalists, lawyers, and public intellectuals, by appealing to a caricaturised language of liberalism, civil society, and political rights, have been able to successfully cast themselves in the role of "organic intellectuals" of this anxious and insecure networked middle class. Through micro-blogs, they helped to construct the "class consciousness" and subjectivity of this ambivalent social group. However, such "class consciousness" eventually degenerated into an abstract and hallow democratic principle wrapped in the form of an universalising "intelligence," thereby displacing and blocking any possibility for discussing and advancing the concrete processes of reforming China's state-owned system and democratising governance. This renders the first collective performance of China's middle class through micro-blogs brilliant, but ephemeral.

In the final analysis, this first collective action does not entirely challenge the political cynicism and selfishness of the middle class. As Pearson has observed, when it comes to actual behaviour on political issues, China's "new middle class" tend to "sit back" (1997, 101). To the extent that micro-blogging, under the condition of anonymity, allows members of China's "new" middle class to "stand out" and participating in an extraordinary national ritual by merely sitting in front of the computer, there remains a deep fissure between their speech acts and their political acts.

(Rewritten from Chinese by Yuezhi Zhao.)

Notes:

1. A further 1,298 blogs may also be attributed to this class, as the mode of speech, style, personal information or “label” provide enough clues to show that they are not likely to be members of the lower social classes.
2. By April 6, 2012, the blog had garnered 121,586 forwards and 21,123 comments.
3. The names of the bloggers have been replaced with simple alphabetical codes. Exceptions were made in cases when the blogger is the real name of a well-known individual or when the name contributes to understand the content of the blog.
4. This blog has been deleted by early April, 2012.

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