"Positive Energy": Hegemonic Intervention and Online Media Discourse in China's Xi Jinping Era

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RESEARCH

"Positive Energy": Hegemonic Intervention and Online Media Discourse in China's Xi Jinping Era

YANG Peidong and TANG Lijun

Scholarship to date agrees that the internet has weakened the Chinese Party-state's ideological and discursive hegemony over society. This article documents a recent intervention into public discourse exercised by the Chinese state through appropriating and promoting a popular online catchphrase—"positive energy" (zheng nengliang). Analysing the "positive energy" phenomena using Laclau and Mouffe's theory of hegemony and discourse, the authors argue that the relative effectiveness of this hegemonic intervention rests on the semantic versatility of "positive energy", which enables "chains of equivalence" to be established between the label's popular meanings, on the one hand, and its propagandist meanings, on the other.

> *The internet is a double-edged sword,*
> *and* positive energy *and* negative energy *are*
> *the two sharp edges coexisting side by side.*
> *To let positive energy thrive or to give negative energy free reign,*
> *the choice is obvious.*[1]
>
> *Qiushi*, Organ of the Central Committee of
> Communist Party of China, 2013

Contemporary China's internet is a carnivalesque space where neologisms, newfangled catchphrases and outlandish visual/textual memes get constantly

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[1] See <http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2013/201312/201306/t20130613_239399.htm> [23 July 2015]; authors' translation. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of Chinese into English in this article are by the authors.

invented, go viral, and then go out of fashion just as quickly.[2] Scholars have shown that such online discursive phenomena are often sociologically significant, and analysing them can yield interesting insights into contemporary Chinese politics, society and culture.[3] In this article, the authors examine the recent catchphrase "positive energy" (*zheng nengliang* 正能量). In China, most popular internet expressions or discourses remain at the lowbrow or "grass-roots" (*caogen* 草根) level, and tend to be used only by ordinary netizens. An extraordinary feature about "positive energy" is that it not only entered the Communist Party of China's (CPC) official lexicon and discourse at the highest level (as the above *Qiushi* excerpt has shown), but was indeed used publicly by Xi Jinping himself on multiple occasions since he became the General Secretary of the CPC in late 2012. More than just another instance of Xi's idiosyncratic fondness of using "hot phrases",[4] the authors argue that "positive energy" actually represents the most recent and a remarkable case of the Chinese Party-state's intervention in online media discourse.

What is "positive energy"? An online article vaguely defines it as "any uplifting power and emotion, representing hope".[5] As the authors later elaborate, with various origins in science, folk beliefs, but most notably Hong Kong-based entertainment news, the term "positive energy" initially had no overt political connotation. The year 2012 saw the expression's sudden rise to popularity to such an extent that a leading Chinese linguistics magazine, *Yaowen juezi*, rated "positive energy" No. 1 among the "top ten catchphrases of the year".[6] Around the same time, the phrase was appropriated by the authorities, and started to appear frequently in various forms of official Party-state communication and publication. With official appropriation, it essentially refers to attitudes or emotions that are aligned with the ideological or value systems of the party-state, or any discourses that promote such an alignment. For instance, optimistic and non-critical journalism that focuses on the positive and hopeful aspects of Chinese society and politics is considered "positive energy", because it encourages the mass's identification with the regime. Yet, this official appropriation did not seem to affect

[2] Gong Haomin and Yang Xin. "Digitized Parody: The Politics of Egao in Contemporary China", *China Information* 24, no. 1 (2010): 3–26; Meng Bingchun. "From Steamed Bun to Grass Mud Horse: E Gao as Alternative Political Discourse on the Chinese Internet", *Global Media and Communication* 7, no. 1 (2011): 33–51; Astrid Nordin and Lisa Richaud, "Subverting Official Language and Discourse in China? Type River Crab for Harmony", *China Information* 28, no. 1 (2014): 47–67; Tang Lijun, "The Politics of Flies: Mocking News in Chinese Cyberspace", *Chinese Journal of Communication* 6, no. 4 (2013): 482–96; Tang Lijun, and Syamantak Bhattacharya, "Power and Resistance: A Case Study of Satire on the Internet", *Sociological Research Online* 16, no. 2 (2011); Tang Lijun and Yang Peidong, "Symbolic Power and the Internet: The Power of a 'Horse'", *Media, Culture & Society* 33, no. 5 (2011): 675–91; Yang Peidong, Tang Lijun and Wang Xuan, "Diaosi as Infrapolitics: Scatological Tropes, Identity-Making and Cultural Intimacy on China's Internet", *Media, Culture & Society* 37, no. 2 (2015): 197–214.

[3] Ibid.

[4] David Bandurski, "Meeting Mr. 'Hot Phrase'", 2015, at <http://chinamediaproject.org/2015/02/06/thus-spoke-uncle-xi/> [19 January 2018].

[5] See <http://www.chinanews.com/cul/2012/08-22/4126061.shtml> [23 July 2015].

[6] See <http://www.chinanews.com/sh/2012/12-30/4448889.shtml> [19 October 2016].

the catchphrase's enormous popularity with the Chinese public. As of May 2016, "positive energy"-tagged posts garnered some 2.1 billion views and more than two million discussion threads on Sina Weibo (Sina microblog) alone.[7]

Early research on the possible impact of the internet on Chinese politics and society had revolved around the question whether it would lead to democratisation. It has become increasingly clear that such a hypothesis is naïve, and the Chinese authoritarian state has proven remarkably resilient in the face of the advent of the internet.[8] This resilience is often portrayed in existing scholarship as the result of a paranoid censorship regime and draconian suppression, coupled with a certain degree of pragmatic tolerance.[9] From a Gramscian perspective, the party-state is said to be confronted with a serious "crisis of hegemony".[10] Furthermore, in facing this crisis, the state is perceived largely to be a defensive actor, passively reacting to the dynamism unleashed by the internet which chips away at its ability to control. This raises an interesting question as to whether, in the age of online media, an authoritarian state such as China can still proactively intervene in the mediasphere and influence societal discourse more broadly. While it has been suggested that the internet may well become a new medium for political propaganda, and therefore serve the interests of the ruling authoritarian regime,[11] there remains little empirical research that illustrates how the authoritarian state could take advantage of the new media environment. Equally, there is little research so far that looks at how the state could use strategies beyond suppression in the governing of online mediasphere. In this context, the case of "positive energy", as this article shall document and analyse, stands out as a rare one in which the party-

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[7] See <http://weibo.com/p/1008083ff5b51b3d66a706c0e3e4072b473f2d?k=%E6%AD%A3%E8%83%BD%E9%87%8F&_from_=huati_thread> [14 May 2016]. For an account about the phenomenon of microblogging in China, see Jonathan Sullivan, "A Tale of Two Microblogs in China", *Media, Culture & Society* 34, no. 6 (2012): 773–83.

[8] Tamara Renee Shie, "The Tangled Web: Does the Internet Offer Promise or Peril for the Chinese Communist Party?", *Journal of Contemporary China* 13, no. 40 (2004): 523–40; Bi Jianhai, "The Internet Revolution in China: The Significance for Traditional Forms of Communist Control", *International Journal* 56, no. 3 (2001): 421–41; Xiao Qiang, "The Internet: A Force to Transform Chinese Society?", in *China's Transformation: The Stories Beyond the Headlines*, ed. Lionel M. Jensen and Timothy B. Weston (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), pp. 129–43; Kevin Latham, "New Media and Subjectivity in China: Problematizing the Public Sphere", in *Towards a New Development Paradigm in Twenty-First Century China: Economy, Society and Politics*, ed. Eric Florence and Pierre Defraigne (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 203–17.

[9] Gary King, Jennifer Pan and Margaret E. Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression", *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (2013): 326–43; Rebecca MacKinnon, "Flatter World and Thicker Walls? Blogs, Censorship and Civic Discourse in China", *Public Choices* 134, no. 1–2 (2008): 31–46.

[10] Tong Yanqi and Lei Shaohua, "War of Position and Microblogging in China", *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 80 (2013): 292–311.

[11] Zheng Yongnian, *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State, and Society in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); Shanti Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas, *Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003); Shie, "The Tangled Web".

state cleverly hijacked an internet catchphrase for its own agenda of hegemonising internet discourse, or at least to intervene hegemonically in it. Most notably, this was arguably done with a good measure of effectiveness. Examining this case thus provides an opportunity to move beyond the control–resistance dichotomous narrative that dominates research on internet in China to date. Furthermore, it showcases a different kind of politics of the internet in which the state assumes a more proactive role in the "battlefield" of ideology and propaganda.[12]

In the next section, the authors first explain their theoretical perspective based on the Gramscian notion of hegemony and Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist development of hegemony theory in relation to the discourse. This is followed by a discussion of the internet and propaganda in China. Subsequently, the authors examine the "positive energy" discourses empirically, offering first an account of the term's origins and its multiple and evolving connotations, and then a structured analysis which distinguishes three levels on which "positive energy" currently operates in Chinese discourses. In the discussion section, the authors address how this "positive energy" discursive hegemonisation is achieved, in conjunction with some observations on the developments in media and internet control since China entered the Xi era. The authors briefly conclude by summarising their arguments in the article and pointing out its limitations.

DISCOURSE AND HEGEMONY: "NODAL POINT" AND "CHAIN OF EQUIVALENCE"

Theorising the basic Marxist tenet of class antagonism, Antonio Gramsci proposed the influential concept of *hegemony*, defined as domination by ideological, intellectual and moral leadership, based on the *consent* of the subordinate groups.[13] This represented a departure from a materialist–determinist view in which class subordination is achieved purely through coercion, and recognises the role played by the superstructure, i.e. the realm of ideas, culture and symbols, in manufacturing consent. As Strinati elaborates, hegemony is the practice whereby:

> dominant groups in society, including fundamentally but not exclusively the ruling class, maintain their dominance by securing the "spontaneous consent" of subordinate groups, including the working class, through the negotiated construction of a political and ideological consensus which incorporates both dominant and dominated groups.[14]

[12] Anne-Marie Brady and Wang Juntao, "China's Strengthened New Order and the Role of Propaganda", *Journal of Contemporary China* 18, no. 62 (2009): 767–88.

[13] Antonio Gramsci, *A Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971).

[14] Dominic Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 165.

Such a consensus, however, cannot be taken for granted, but must be fought over, and maintained. For Gramsci then, class struggle involves the struggle for hegemony—for the subordinate class's consent under a particular sociopolitical order.

Based on Gramsci's ideas above, and influenced by post-structuralist thinking emphasising the indeterminacy of sign/signification, Laclau and Mouffe famously developed a social theory of hegemony centred on *discourse*.[15] For Gramsci, class or social groups are pre-given because their interests are determined according to the economic structure. Laclau and Mouffe rejected such materialist determinism and argue that all social groupings are constituted by *discourse* and their meanings are never fixed but always open to reconstitution. In describing how hegemony can be achieved and subverted through discourse, Laclau and Mouffe developed a number of conceptual tools.

A *discourse* is understood by Laclau and Mouffe as the attempted fixation of a web of meanings within a particular domain of signs.[16] Signs are regarded as free-floating, with a multiplicity of possible meanings. Before their meanings are fixed, signs are called *elements*; when their meanings are fixed, they become *moments*. "Discourses fix webs of meaning in relation to *nodal points*",[17] nodal points being key terms that secure signs in a specific constellation, turning them from elements into moments. For example, the term "socialism" is a nodal point, and elements such as "democracy" or "rule of law" coalesce around it to become "socialist democracy" and "socialist rule of law", which can have very different meanings from the ways in which "democracy" and "rule of law" are understood in liberal capitalism. The practice that establishes relations between elements and stabilises their meanings in relation to each other is *articulation*. A discourse is the result of articulation. In short, a discourse establishes a tentative closure, temporarily halting the fluctuations in the meaning of signs.

Laclau and Mouffe stress, however, that this closure is never complete, because the meanings of signs are open to *re*-articulation. In the struggle for meaning fixation, discourses may come into conflict with each other, and one articulation may confront competing articulatory practices. In this antagonistic confrontation, *hegemony* emerges when one articulatory practice rises to dominance. As Laclau and Mouffe put it, "[i]n order to have hegemony, the requirement is that elements whose own nature does not predetermine them to enter into one type of arrangement rather than another, nevertheless coalesce, as a result of an external or articulating practice".[18] Therefore, hegemony involves the achievement of meaning fixation across discourses that collide

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[15] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2001).

[16] See also Marianne W. Jorgensen and Louise J. Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London: Sage, 2002).

[17] David Rear and Alan Jones, "Discursive Struggle and Contested Signifiers in the Arenas of Education Policy and Work Skills in Japan", *Critical Policy Studies* 7, no. 4 (2013): 375–94, p. 379; original emphases.

[18] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. xii.

antagonistically; and those attempts to establish hegemony may be called *hegemonic interventions*.

Just as a discourse cannot crystallise elements into moments permanently, hegemony can be dissolved. In establishing and subverting hegemony, the *logic of equivalence* and *logic of difference* are at work. For instance, when the discourse of Revolution becomes hegemonic, although the revolutionaries may hail from different social groups and backgrounds (e.g. farmers, workers and small business owners), the revolutionary articulation dissolves their differences and renders their positions *equivalent*, i.e. united in opposition to the anti-revolutionary. This logic of equivalence, however, can never completely eradicate the inherent dissimilarities among these disparate groups, but is always faced with the risk of subversion by the logic of difference: another articulation may accentuate the differences within the revolutionary coalition, cause members to perceive their diverging interests, and hence dissolve the revolutionary hegemony.

HEGEMONY, PROPAGANDA AND INTERNET/ONLINE MEDIA IN CHINA

The foregoing theoretical formulations on hegemony remain highly pertinent to China. As Su Xiaobo has shown, in both China's communist revolution and the post-1949 socialist nation-building, the CPC and its leaders have placed extraordinary emphasis on political ideology in order to shape mass consciousness, for the ultimate purpose of establishing hegemonic rule.[19] Indeed, insofar as the realm of ideology and thought is concerned, much of Maoist China could be regarded as a project of socialist hegemonisation, eventually taken to tragic extremes in the Cultural Revolution. Like in many countries that followed communist/socialist ideologies, propaganda was intensively used by the Maoist state to produce mass consent and elicit mass enthusiasm for the socialist enterprise.[20]

Since the country entered the reform era, and the focus of the CPC shifted from class struggle to economic development, propaganda work is increasingly caught in an awkward situation as the market logic took roots and people's thoughts have liberalised. Although in reform-era China, the propaganda machine has reinvented itself and continues to be extensively deployed to serve the evolving needs of the CPC party-state,[21] there can be little doubt that its capacity to hegemonise social discourses, let alone people's thoughts, has been significantly weakened. As a telling piece of evidence, some scholars note that one of the reasons why central CPC departments

[19] Su Xiaobo, "Revolution and Reform: The Role of Ideology and Hegemony in Chinese Politics", *Journal of Contemporary China* 20, no. 69 (2011): 307–26.
[20] Brady and Wang, "China's Strengthened New Order and the Role of Propaganda".
[21] Ibid.

resort to publishing propaganda articles under personified pseudonyms is "in order to reduce the negative emotional response of the target audience".[22]

There are multiple reasons why the contemporary Chinese state's capacity to achieve hegemony is greatly reduced, but of particular relevance in the context of this study is the advent of the internet. Rising from barely nine million internet users at the beginning of 2000,[23] there were, reportedly, as many as 557 million mobile internet users and a total of 649 million netizens in China by February 2015.[24] For vast numbers of Chinese citizens, particularly the relatively young and educated urbanites, the internet has become the primary communicative medium and a crucial dimension to their citizenship, socialisation, and identity expression.[25] Furthermore, in comparison to traditional media such as newspapers and the TV, which are still obliged to act as the mouthpiece (*houshe* 喉舌) of the Party-state,[26] the internet and new media constitute a more dynamic and complex space because of its commercial and technological characteristics. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the online space in the current investigation of discourse and hegemony in China.

Chinese online space is characterised by a paradoxical combination of tight government control and vibrant online activism.[27] On the one hand, the state operates an elaborate internet control and censorship regime, with one of the most powerful and sophisticated filtering systems in the world, the Great Firewall, in place.[28] Apart from surveillance technology, the authorities also employ strategies such as formal regulation, economic incentive and punitive action, to prevent and crush any online activities that are deemed to threaten social and political stability.[29] On the other hand, observers of Chinese cyberspace have noted that the state censorship regime is sophisticated enough to tolerate some critical voices and dissenting views, so long as

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[22] Tsai Wen-Hsuan and Kao Peng-Hsiang, "Secret Codes of Political Propaganda: The Unknown System of Writing Teams", *The China Quarterly* 214 (2013): 394–410, p. 407; the target audience here refers to grass-roots CPC cadres.

[23] China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), *The Statistical (Semiannual) Reports of Internet Development in China* (*Zhongguo hulian wangluo fazhan zhuangkuang tongji baogao*), September 2015, at <http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/hlwtjbg/201206/t20120612_26725.htm> [9 September 2015].

[24] Steven Millward, "China Now Has 557m Mobile Internet Users, Grand Total of 649m Netizens", at <https://www.techinasia.com/cnnic-china-577-million-mobile-web-users-and-649-internet-users-2014/> [19 January 2018].

[25] Liu Fengshu, *Urban Youth in China: Modernity, the Internet and the Self* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011); Kevin Latham, "New Media and Subjectivity in China: Problematizing the Public Sphere", in *Towards a New Development Paradigm in Twenty-First Century China: Economy, Society and Politics*, ed. Eric Florence and Pierre Defraigne (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 203–17.

[26] Kevin Latham, "Nothing but the Truth: News Media, Power and Hegemony in South China", *The China Quarterly* 163 (2000): 633–54.

[27] Yang Guobin. "Activists Beyond Virtual Borders: Internet-Mediated Networks and Informational Politics in China", *First Monday* Special Issue 7 (2006).

[28] "Open Net Initiative", 2012, at <https://opennet.net/research/profiles/china> [19 January 2019].

[29] Lokman Tsui, "The Panopticon as the Antithesis of a Space of Freedom: Control and Regulation of the Internet in China", *China Information* 17, no. 2 (2003): 65–82.

these provide a channel for venting frustration without causing troubles.[30] Thus, despite repression, the internet indeed opens up a space, albeit limited, for ordinary Chinese to raise their own voices and articulate dissenting discourses, such as criticisms of official corruption, and even to pursue online activisms that challenge government policies and social injustices.[31] In a growing body of scholarship on China's internet,[32] some scholars pay attention to control and censorship mechanisms and practices,[33] while others have focused on activism.[34] Suffice it to say, the scholarship emphasises antagonism and conflict in China's cyberspace, and these online antagonisms and conflicts reflect the contradictions existing in Chinese society.

What the confrontation/conflict-focused analytical approach has neglected are alternative logics to politics of discourse and media. As discussed in the earlier section, hegemony is the discursive dissolution of antagonism and the creation of consent. In the struggle for discursive hegemony, the emphasis is on the rearticulation of the meaning of information rather than the simplistic suppression of information. The former is characteristic of hegemonic intervention, while the latter is characteristic of repressive control such as censorship. Despite efforts by some scholars in highlighting the importance of the former as a more sophisticated approach to "guiding" public opinion/discourse,[35] scholarly attention to hegemonic intervention has been inadequate so far.

To be sure, this article is not the first to bring the theoretical perspective of discourse and hegemony to bear on the study of the Chinese cyber-/media-sphere. Several recently published studies on cyber activism in China have utilised similar conceptual frameworks, but all have focused on the *counter-hegemonic* articulatory practices of Chinese netizens or online opinion leaders, bringing into relief the CPC

[30] David K. Herold, "Development of a Civil Society Online? Internet Vigilantism and State Control in Chinese Cyberspace", *Asia Journal of Global Studies* 2, no. 1 (2008): 26–37; King, Pan and Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression".

[31] Tang Lijun and Helen Sampson, "The Interaction between Mass Media and the Internet in Non-Democratic States: The Case of China", *Media, Culture & Society* 34, no. 4 (2012): 457–71; Yang Guobin, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

[32] See David K. Herold and Gabriele de Seta, "Through the Looking Glass: Twenty Years of Chinese Internet Research", *The Information Society* 31, no. 1 (2015): 68–82 for a comprehensive review.

[33] E.g. King, Pan and Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression", *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (2013): 326–43; Li, Shubo, "The Online Public Space and Popular Ethos in China", *Media, Culture & Society* 32, no. 1 (2010): 63–83; MacKinnon, "Flatter World and Thicker Walls? "; Tsui, "The Panopticon as the Antithesis of a Space of Freedom".

[34] E.g. Jonathan Hassid, "Safety Valve or Pressure Cooker? Blogs in Chinese Political Life", *Journal of Communication* 62, no. 2 (2012): 212–30; Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China*.

[35] Johan Lagerkvist, *After the Internet, before Democracy: Competing Norms in Chinese Media and Society* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010); Daniela Stockmann, "Who Believes Propaganda? Media Effects during the Anti-Japanese Protests in Beijing", *The China Quarterly* 202 (2010): 269–89.

party-state's inability to hold onto a discursive hegemony.[36] Similarly, a number of other studies examined how Chinese netizens used mockery, satire and parody to playfully undermine CPC propaganda slogans and propagandist news programmes, which may also be interpreted as a form of counter-hegemonic discursive struggle.[37] These studies' common focus on the counter-hegemonic is arguably another manifestation of the dominance of a control-vs-resistance perspective as noted earlier, which leaves the Party-state's strategies and/or agency under-studied.

In summary, the preceding literature review identifies three interrelated arguments or patterns in existing scholarship. First, post-Mao CPC party-state's ability to establish hegemony is said to have been significantly weakened. Second, to date, research on the internet in China has often assumed an antagonistic outlook, focusing on conflict but not consent. Thirdly, the CPC party-state tends to be portrayed as a passive actor relying largely on repressive measures to achieve control of the (online) media and social discourse. The case of "positive energy", as dealt with in this article, presents a case of state-initiated hegemonic intervention that arguably unsettles all three received wisdoms.

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The term "positive energy" attracted the attention of one of the authors when it was announced as the top catchphrase of the year at the end of 2012. Since then, he has been collecting news reports related to the term while browsing Chinese news on the internet on a daily basis. While these materials served as the starting point and the initial data for this article, the authors subsequently performed searches in a more schematic manner on both CNKI.net (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) and Baidu.com in order to trace the origins and development of the term.

CNKI.net is China's integrated national online database system that provides the most comprehensive data services on academic and professional publications. CNKI's "Important Chinese Newspapers Full-text Database" covers 154 national titles and 450 provincial/local titles—in other words, virtually all of China's more influential print newspapers. Using this database, the authors were able to gather statistics on the appearances of "positive energy" in mainstream state-controlled media discourse, as all print newspapers in China are subject to strict state supervision. Baidu is the top Chinese search engine, and Baidu News enabled the search for news reports containing the term "positive energy" published after 2003. As a China-based search engine, Baidu search is inevitably subject to filtering. However, in the present case about "positive

[36] Marielle Stigum Gleiss, "Speaking up for the Suffering (Br)other: Weibo Activism, Discursive Struggles, and Minimal Politics in China", *Media, Culture & Society* 37, no. 4 (2015): 513–29; Yang Guobin, "Contesting Food Safety in the Chinese Media: Between Hegemony and Counter Hegemony", *The China Quarterly* 214 (2013): 337–55; Tong and Lei, "War of Position and Microblogging in China".

[37] Tang and Yang, "Symbolic Power and the Internet"; Tang, "The Politics of Flies"; Ashley Esarey and Qiang Xiao, "Political Expression in the Chinese Blogosphere: Below the Radar", *Asian Survey* 48, no. 5 (2008): 752–72.

energy", the authors believe filtering or censorship has had minimal impact on the research results. This is because, as the authors' argument posits, the Chinese state in fact actively promoted the term's popularisation instead of suppressing it.

Lastly, the authors also consulted online encyclopedias, such as Wikipedia, Baidupedia, and Interactive-pedia, for important events and texts that marked key moments of the phenomenon.

THE "POSITIVE ENERGY" EVOLUTION AND EXPLOSION: FROM SCIENCE, FOLK BELIEFS AND CHARITY TO POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND PROPAGANDA

As discussed earlier, hegemony involves articulating and fixing meanings in relation to nodal points. Therefore, to address the question how the term "positive energy" became a vehicle for hegemonic intervention, it is crucial to trace the term's origins and development and discern the various meanings attached to it.

"Positive energy" became a popular catchphrase in 2012, but its media presence dates back much earlier. Figure 1, based on the CNKI database, shows that prior to 2007, the appearances of "positive energy" in Chinese newspapers were negligible; between 2007 and 2011, the term started to gain some foothold, but remained far and few in between; then, the term suddenly gained massive traction in 2012, and maintained high, steady levels of visibility from 2013 up to the time of writing, although the phenomenon showed signs of tailing off in recent times. This pattern was also corroborated by the authors' searches on the internet using the Baidu search engine.

Pre-2012 Usages: Origins, Meanings, Development

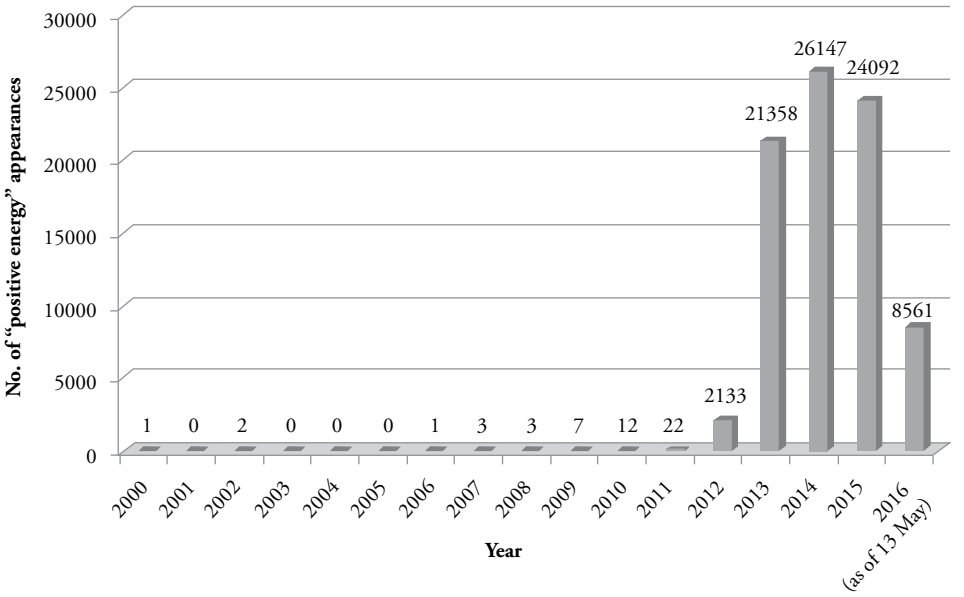
The authors' investigations have shown that, prior to 2012, there were broadly four meanings or ways in which the term "positive energy" had been used: (i) as a layman's appropriation of a supposedly scientific jargon; (ii) as a concept associated with Chinese folk beliefs; (iii) as a way to refer to acts of charity/philanthropy; and (iv) as a notion spoken in the context of personal emotional or psychological matters.

In the first case, "positive energy" was apparently a jargon from theoretical physics and cosmic science,[38] which then found its way into more earthly matters such as stock trading. The earliest mention of "positive energy" on Chinese cyberspace that the authors found was in an article published in 2003 that advertised a stock trading software.[39] In explaining one of the modelling functions in the software, the article claims that the model "…applies the concept of energy in physics and cosmic science to the stock market", and that "positive energy indicates that the market is on a rising tide, while negative energy indicates that the market is on a retreating tide".

[38] See a Baidu post in 2006 involving a question-and-answer about the cosmic phenomenon of "worm hole" which mentioned "positive/negative energy", at <http://zhidao.baidu.com/new?word=&ie=GBK> [25 July 2015].

[39] See <http://finance.sina.com.cn/roll/20030808/1846399224.shtml> [25 July 2015].

Figure 1. "Positive Energy" in Major Chinese Newspapers (January 2000 – May 2016)



As an interesting juxtaposition to this purportedly scientific provenance of the term, "positive energy" also appeared in relation to Chinese folk beliefs. In a 2007 article which was first published by a Guangzhou-based commercial daily and subsequently reposted on 163.com, a geomancy expert talked about lighting arrangements in the domestic setting as follows:[40] "Home […] is a place to accumulate and recharge energy. […] lighting is an important source of energy in the home setting; different shapes, colors and numbers of lights bring different kinds of energy. Therefore, we have to learn about these correct lighting arrangements that bring positive energy, and bring the family good fortune".[41]

The third usage of "positive energy" refers to acts of charity or the positive effects charitable acts bring about in society. This was witnessed, for example, in the name of a youth volunteer group founded in Hong Kong in 2004: "Green Apple Positive Energy Youth Team", for which the Hong Kong superstar Andy Lau acted as the patron.[42] And, the fourth pre-2012 meaning in which the term "positive energy" had been circulating online concerned personal emotional and psychological matters. Often spoken as contrary to "negative energy" (*fu nengliang* 负能量), which refers to the negative emotions or attitudes as a result of trials and tribulations in personal life,

[40] Chinese geomancy, or *fengshui*, is a system of knowledge drawing on traditional Chinese cosmology, metaphysics and supernatural beliefs that studies the location-ing/positioning of objects and "elements" and their consequences for the fortunes of people and/or places.

[41] See <http://news.163.com/07/1107/09/3SMH6A2E000120GU.html> [25 July 2015].

[42] See <http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2004-06-27/19052922284s.shtml> [25 July 2015].

"positive energy" means optimism, positive attitudes and emotions that help individuals overcome these difficulties or hardships. It is noteworthy that all of the earliest references to "positive energy" in the above two meanings on the Chinese internet were in fact found in entertainment news stories about Hong Kong celebrities.[43] Thus, the authors believe that Hong Kong might have been the place of origin for these two particular usages of the term, and Hong Kong-based celebrities inadvertently played an important, albeit indirect role in popularising this term in mainland China through entertainment news reporting focused on them.

2012: Popularisation

The year 2012 marked the beginning of the massive popularisation of the term, to which two events made immediate and significant contribution.

The first event was the 2012 London Olympics. Among the 18 Chinese who were invited to take part in that year's Olympics torch relay,[44] eight stood out particularly in the eyes of the Chinese public. Contrary to the common perception that only elite public figures get to be chosen, these eight participants were "grass-roots" (*caogen*) Chinese citizens who distinguished themselves by embodying a social conscience, civic spirit, and morally laudable conduct. For example, among them was a Xinjiang Uyghur man who earned a modest living by selling barbeque lamb but nevertheless donated the lion's share of his earnings to support the schooling of hundreds of poor Chinese children. Similarly, the other seven Chinese torch runners were all recognised nationwide for their morally exemplary conduct and/or public contributions in fields such as education, environmental activism, and charity—in other words, for their "positive energy".

Effusively praising these outstanding compatriots, many touched Chinese social media users at the time posted microblogs (for example, on Sina and Sohu Weibo) with "positive energy" in the headlines.[45] Soon, the Chinese internet and social media sphere were flooded with "positive energy"-tagged posts and stories, some related to the torch runners, others pertaining to "positive energy" stories in people's daily lives similar to those of the torch runners. Such phenomenal trending of "positive energy" on social media indicated that the Chinese public was moved by what the eight Olympic torch runners stood for, and was inspired to generate and spread "positive energy" in emulation. As one online blog article observed effusively:

> These torch runners, who are representatives of Chinese positive energy, use their own actions to illustrate the positive energy of the Chinese grass roots, and make more Chinese people understand the meaning of positive energy. China needs more positive energy, more brave and kind-hearted people; the positive

[43] See <http://ent.qq.com/music/a/20050625/000010_1.htm> [25 July 2015]; and <http://ent.sina.com.cn/s/h/2007-12-03/09521817124.shtml> [25 July 2015].

[44] See <http://www.china.com.cn/sports/txt/2012-07/11/content_25879298.htm> [26 July 2015].

[45] See <http://blog.cntv.cn/18950958-3961614.html> [27 July 2015].

> energy contained in their bodies will give society a little bit more warmth, and a little less indifference, a little bit more helpfulness, and a little less guardedness. Positive energy makes people more trusting, and less deceitful; it makes people love China and this world a bit more. Thousands upon thousands of netizens call for positive energy on their Weibo. This shows how much they desire truth, benevolence and beauty; how much they aspire to espouse values of equality, justice, and harmony.[46]

A second event that accounts for the popularisation of "positive energy" in 2012 was the translation and publication of British positive psychology guru Richard Wiseman's book *Rip It Up* in China with the Chinese title *Positive Energy* 正能量. As a book that claims to offer a new approach to achieving positive attitudes leading to greater happiness and success in life, Wiseman's book is a positive psychology self-help manual that employs the term "positive energy" in the fourth meaning as examined previously. However, in comparing the book's original version in English and its Chinese translation, the authors discovered that the former contained no mention of the expression "positive energy" at all, and it became clear that "positive energy" was entirely a Chinese imposition during the translation process.[47] Hence, the popularity of Wiseman's positive psychology and the trending status of the expression "positive energy" in its own right could be said to have had a mutually enhancing effect, propelling the term into greater popularity.

From 2012 Onwards: Official Appropriation and Promotion

An observant Chinese commentator pointed out a curious fact about *Rip It Up*/*Positive Energy* in an online essay: *Rip It Up* was first published on 5 July 2012 in English by Macmillan Publishers, but the Chinese version *Positive Energy* came out as soon as 1 August 2012, less than a month later.[48] Remarking that "anybody with a little knowledge about the [book] publication cycle should be able to smell something fishy", this commentator hinted at a conspiracy theory whereby the Chinese government possibly had a hand in promoting the catchphrase.[49]

Regardless of this conspiracy theory, it was clear that from 2012 the regime indeed demonstrated a measure of fondness towards "positive energy", as the term

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[46] See <http://blog.cntv.cn/18950958-3961614.html> [27 July 2015].

[47] Similarly, the authors found that although a book entitled *Communication of Positive Energy* (*Goutong zheng nengliang* 沟通正能量, available at <http://product.dangdang.com/23519105.html>, was published in China in 2014 as the Chinese translation of the works of American self-improvement guru Dale Carnegie, the latter never used the term "positive energy" in the titles of any of his original books in English.

[48] See <http://www.21ccom.net/articles/thought/bianyan/20150309121954_all.html> [27 July 2015].

[49] The one example that the authors found to suggest the CPC's direct endorsement of *Rip It Up* was an article in the 5 November 2013's *Xinhua Daily* (CPC's oldest national newspaper dating back to before the founding of the People's Republic of China) under the 'CPC News—Theory' section. See <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/1105/c40531-23441342.html> [28 July 2015].

began to make increasingly frequent appearances in communications and/or publications associated with the Party-state. On 7 April 2012, an article with the headline "Transmit Positive Energy Wherever You Can" appeared in *China Youth Daily*, the organ of the Communist Youth League of China, encouraging people to build a harmonious society through kind-hearted deeds and moral behaviours.[50] Another article dated 4 September 2012 appeared in *Beijing Business Today*, under the title "State Administration of Radio Film & Television: We Encourage the Making of TV Dramas with Positive Energy".[51]

The most remarkable official appropriation and endorsement of "positive energy" in 2012, however, came from none other than Xi Jinping himself. In December, Xi, who had become China's top leader a month before, received former US President Jimmy Carter in Beijing, to whom he remarked—"Both China and the United States should be innovative and make efforts to accumulate 'positive energy' to build a China–US cooperative partnership based on mutual respect and mutual benefit".[52] Barely a week later, when Wang Qishan, member of the Standing Committee of the CPC Politburo, visited the United States, he also used "positive energy" in his speeches.[53]

Since 2013, "positive energy" has been in full bloom in various forms of Chinese media, and secured a place in the Party-state rhetoric at the highest level. For instance, as quoted at the beginning of this article, *Qiushi*, the organ of the CPC Central Committee, published an article on 16 June 2013 titled "Beware of Negative Energy on the Internet".[54] Denouncing "negative energy" in the form of negative news and other critical online content that cause people's disillusionment and cynicism about the Party and government, the article advocates boycotting "negative energy" and encourages netizens to become transmitters of "positive energy" to create hopefulness and uplifting attitudes. An editorial piece headlined as "Use the new media well, to promote positive energy" and published in *People's Daily* on 9 July 2013 essentially espouses the same logic.[55]

In addition to the governing of cyberspace, the term "positive energy" has also been used in the broader contexts of propaganda work, education, and even strategic relations and international affairs. For instance, in October 2014, Xi Jinping presided at the Forum on Literature and Arts in Beijing, an important forum that was reminiscent of the landmark 1942 Yan'an Forum on Literature and Arts, which Mao Zedong attended and classified the role of creative work as one of serving politics under Chinese socialism. At the end of the 2014 Forum, Xi made a point of greeting two popular but controversial young bloggers who were known for their stridently

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[50] See <http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2012-04/07/nw.D110000zgqnb_20120407_4-03.htm> [27 July 2015].
[51] See <http://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2012-09-04/01207578481.shtml> [27 July 2015].
[52] See <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-12/13/c_132039163.htm> [27 July 2015].
[53] See <http://www.voachinese.com/content/xijinpingwangqishan20121220/1568796.html> [27 July 2015].
[54] See <http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2013/201312/201306/t20130613_239399.htm> [23 July 2015].
[55] See <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n/2013/0709/c1003-22128956.html> [28 July 2015].

patriotic and nationalistic writings, and saying to them "I hope you will create more works with positive energy."[56] A *Quishi* article published on 3 February 2015 urges sternly that "Teachers must spread positive energy in the classroom".[57] At the 13th Shangri-La Forum held in Singapore in May–June 2014, the People's Liberation Army Deputy Chief-of-Staff Wang Guanzhong reassured forum participants that "for Asia's peace and security, China represents a constructive force, a positive force, a positive energy".[58]

DEFINING "POSITIVE ENERGY" AND MAPPING ITS MEANINGS

Having traced the trajectory of "positive energy" on China's online media, the authors advance the following definition of positive energy as it is currently used:

> *positive energy* is the capacity to induce positive emotions and/or attitudes, the potential to induce constructive/conciliatory discourses and/or actions, in individuals or collectives such as the society and nation. Those positive emotions/attitudes/thoughts so induced are also simply referred to as positive energy, as is any event/discourse that is said to contain positive energy.

The authors have further identified three distinct yet interrelated levels on which "positive energy" is meaningful.

Individual–Personal

First, "positive energy" is spoken of at the *individual–personal* level. This includes both the meaning popularised by Hong Kong celebrities facing personal trials and tribulations, and the positive psychology sense of the term. The characteristics of "positive energy" discourse at this level are that they tend to be inward-looking, introspective, reflective, often underpinned by an individualistic ethos.

The literary form with which "positive energy" of this hue is typically associated is commonly known in Chinese sociolinguistic contexts as "chicken soup" (*jitang* 鸡汤). With origins in the title of motivational speakers Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen's book series *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, the term "chicken soup" now widely refers to any textual (or visual) form that conveys motivational aphorisms or messages of wisdom in China. Popular mobile phone chat application WeChat's subscription function of *Chinese Readers' Digest Selections* is one such example of the Chinese version of "chicken soup". Adopting the slogan "share big wisdom; spread positive energy" (*fenxiang da zhihui chuanbo zheng nengliang* 分享大智慧 传播正能量), the readers' digest regularly updates subscribers with nicely written mini essays, often accompanied by beautiful illustrations, that ruminate on topics such as how to lead a better life or how to be a better person.

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[56] See <http://news.china.com/domestic/945/20141016/18863497_all.html> [28 July 2015].
[57] See <http://www.qstheory.cn/wp/2015-02/03/c_1114240287.htm> [28 July 2015].
[58] See <http://www.chinanews.com/mil/2014/06-01/6235104.shtml> [28 July 2015].

Societal–Cultural

"Positive energy" at the second level refers to the *societal–cultural* level. "Positive energy" at this level encompasses all of the examples related to acts of charity, exemplary moral conduct, social conscience, civic virtues, and so forth that were examined earlier. As the name suggests, "positive energy" discourses at this level pertain primarily to social interactions/relations as well as moral/ethical issues that arise from society and are essentially underpinned by human value systems, whether universal or culturally specific. The authors reckon that societal–cultural "positive energy" discourses account for the majority of internet and social media contents tagged with this label. Arguably, this is because "positive energy" in this connotation has the greatest resonance with Chinese users of the internet and social media.

The typical discursive form in which societal–cultural "positive energy" manifests is journalism, including both institutionalised journalism and citizen journalism enabled through the ubiquitous access to mobile internet and social media. The Chinese term *haoren haoshi* 好人好事, literally meaning "good people good deeds", describes this genre of journalism most succinctly. In April 2015, ifeng.com, one of the most dynamic and progressive of China's large media companies, created a news segment called "warm story" (*nuan xinwen* 暖新闻) dedicated to news stories that supposedly warm people's hearts with "positive energy".[59] Most of these "warm stories" are "good people good deeds" narratives. Apparently, news portal ifeng.com has set a national trend: many influential national internet portals, such as sohu.com, 163.com, Xinhua News, and numerous provincial/local portals, subsequently featured "warm story" segments. In all of the aforementioned portals, the explicit mission of these segments is to "pass on positive energy" (*chuanti zheng nengliang* 传递正能量). The promotion of such "positive energy" news by the media invariably aligns neatly with the Party-state's policy.

Political–National/Global

The authors venture to label "positive energy" discourse at the third and grandest level as *political–national/global* because it pertains explicitly to political/ideological/strategic issues at domestic and/or international/global levels. The positive values affirmed and propagated include, most prominently, nationalism, patriotism and "socialism with Chinese characteristics". At the 18th CPC Party Congress in 2012 which witnessed the power transition to the Xi Jinping leadership, the notion of "Core Socialist Values" (*shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhiguan* 社会主义核心价值观) was proposed to encompass most, if not all, of such politically and ideologically oriented "positive" values.[60]

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[59] See <http://news.ifeng.com/listpage/70374/1/list.shtml> [29 July 2015].

[60] The Core Socialist Values include: prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, the rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendship; see <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-02/25/c_126190257.htm> [30 July 2015].

Political–national/global "positive energy" can be found in a variety of textual forms. In addition to the obvious domain of state-controlled mass communication, another important source is elite or learned discourses such as scholarly publications or expert commentaries on political issues and current affairs. For example, Party-state education/research organs such as the CPC Central Party School and think tanks serving the Party-state, such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences[61] and the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau,[62] routinely publish theoretical works that explicate and justify the current Chinese political system. Such works are said to have "positive energy" because they provide legitimacy for, and therefore hope and confidence in, the "China model". Indeed, the slogan of "Three Self-Confidence" (*sange zhixin* 三个自信)—namely confidence in the (socialist) road, confidence in the theory (of socialism with Chinese characteristics) and confidence in the (Chinese socialist) institutions—was also emphasised at the 18th Party Congress.

Internationally/globally oriented use of "positive energy" includes discourses about China's peaceful rise, China's positive contributions to regional/global order and security, and China's establishment of win-win relationships with other world countries. It is worth pointing out that, in such political "positive energy" discourses, the national orientation and international/global orientation are often closely connected. "Positive energy" in relation to China's domestic political system or governance is often a response to Western liberal–democratic critiques (which are obviously regarded as a kind of "negative energy"); and assertions about China's constructive role in the global order further justifies China's domestic sociopolitical order.[63] The "positive energy" transmitted by pro-regime public intellectuals such as Zhang Weiwei and Martin Jacques illustrates this point well.

Although the authors classify "positive energy" into three categories in the analysis, these categories are not mutually exclusive. For example, although Core Socialist Values primarily underpin political–ideological "positive energy", some of the Core Values are evidently also celebrated in societal–cultural "positive energy" discourses.[64] Furthermore, "positive energy" often permeates the boundaries, and recipients or transmitters of "positive energy" can mobilise different types simultaneously and across boundaries. For instance, an individual person afflicted with "negative energy" may attempt to gain "positive energy" not only by practising an introspective self-examination/improvement (i.e. at the individual–personal level), but also by becoming more optimistic and hopeful about the society/culture (i.e. at the societal–cultural

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[61] Margaret Sleeboom-Faulkner, *The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences: Shaping the Reforms, Academia and China (1977–2003)* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

[62] Ngeow Chow Bing, "From Translation House to Think Tank: The Changing Role of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Compilation and Translation Bureau", *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 93 (2014): 554–72.

[63] See also Kingsley Edney, "Soft Power and the Chinese Propaganda System", *Journal of Contemporary China* 21, no. 78 (2012): 899–914.

[64] Heike Holbig, "Remaking the CCP's Ideology: Determinants, Progress, and Limits under Hu Jintao", *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 38, no. 3 (2009): 35–61.

level) and the nation-state and global world (i.e. at the political–national/global level) in which they live. In fact, such boundary/category-crossing capacity lies at the heart of the effectiveness of the "positive energy" discursive intervention, as discussed in the next section.

TABLE 1
CURRENT "POSITIVE ENERGY" IN CHINESE MEDIASPHERE—A THREE-LEVEL ANALYSIS

Level	Positive Energy	Positive values encouraged
Individual–Personal	*Characteristics*: inward-looking; introspective; reflective; individualistic *Typical forms*: "Chicken soup" essays/books (mini essays conveying wisdom and positive thinking); words of wisdom *Examples*: Readers' Digest; *Rip It Up*; The Chinese Dream Show; Positive Energy in Society (TV show)	Optimism; ambition; self-confidence; persistence (e.g. in study and work); appreciativeness; generosity; sophistication; cultivation; correct attitude towards life/wealth; peace of mind; and others
Societal–Cultural	*Characteristics*: Social interactions/relations-oriented; interactive; ethical; moral *Typical forms*: Journalism; TV programmes *Examples*: "Warm News"; "Touching China" (TV show)	Virtually all moral virtues a social person should possess: filial piety; respect; helpfulness; philanthropy; compassion; dedication to work; altruism/selflessness; love; trust; integrity/honesty
Political–National/global	*Characteristics*: Political issues-oriented; concerning national/global issues *Typical forms*: State-sponsored journalism; TV; specialised publications (e.g. scholarly books, academic papers) *Examples*: Works by pro-regime scholars/ intellectuals such as Zhang Weiwei and Martin Jacques; "Three Self-Confidences"; "Peaceful Rise"; "New type of major power relations"	Nationalism; Patriotism; Socialism with Chinese characteristics; Core Socialist Values; Confidence/pride in the Chinese political system, in Chinese culture

DISCUSSIONS

Deng Xiaoping's reforms saw China transition from a(n) (eventually failed) revolutionary hegemony to a(n) (initially successful) reformist hegemony.[65] But as reform deepened and social stratification intensified,[66] post-Deng CPC leaderships were faced with the increasingly challenging task of producing mass consent amid mounting social

[65] Deng famously said: "Development is the absolute principle" (*fazhan caishi ying daoli*); see also Su, "Revolution and Reform".
[66] Wang Hui, *The End of the Revolution: China and the Limits of Modernity* (London: Verso, 2011).

antagonisms. Xi's predecessors, both Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, propagated their own brands of hegemonic theoretical systems under the labels of "Three Represents" Theory (*sange daibiao zhongyao sixiang* 三个代表重要思想) and "Harmonious Society" (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会), respectively.[67] The former advocated, at its core, that the CPC represented the most fundamental interest of the broadest masses, whereas the latter envisioned a society in which all interests are in harmony under the leadership of the Party.

However, both catchphrases encountered significant discursive counter-hegemonic resistance in the Chinese cyberspace. With "Three Represents" homophonically ridiculed by netizens as "wearing three watches" (*dai sange biao* 戴三个表),[68] and similarly "Harmonious Society" as "river crab" (*hexie* 河蟹),[69] these two expressions spawned a large amount of online satiric textual production. Evidently, both theorisations in their attempts to create mass consent and discursive hegemony were considered failures. In contrast, in recent cases of "positive energy", the authors found little evidence of a widespread popular resistance, save for a handful of articles written by intellectuals critiquing the notion.[70] In fact, by and large, "positive energy" appears to continue to enjoy considerable grass-roots popularity despite appropriation by the regime. By early August 2015, for instance, as many as 816,705 Sina Weibo users had the words "positive energy" explicitly in their IDs. As a hegemonic intervention into public discourse, "positive energy" seems to be markedly more effective than previous slogans of hegemonic intent. Why has this been the case?

What distinguishes "positive energy" from contrived theoretical constructs such as "Three Represents" and "Harmonious Society" is, most notably, the former's non-official origins in popular online discourse. This difference is significant. First, as an existing discourse, the general public has already attached certain meanings to "positive energy"; hence its signification cannot be monopolised by the state. At the same time, as an ambiguous term, the meaning of "positive energy" is often not pre-given, but is emergent in the actual contexts in which it is being used online and offline. Thus, at the outset, "positive energy" entails, and is amenable to, grass-roots participation. Second, the initial popularity of "positive energy" seems to reflect basic intuitions and psychological needs of humans as social beings. People desire to be happy individuals leading socially and culturally fulfilling lives. Arguably, this implies that humans are naturally inclined towards individual–personal and societal–cultural "positive energies". In other words, "positive energy" is rooted in and springs out of basic human feelings. By contrast, both "Three Represents" and "Harmonious Society" were contructed

[67] Holbig, "Remaking the CCP's Ideology".

[68] Esarey and Qiang, "Political Expression in the Chinese Blogosphere".

[69] Tang and Yang, "Symbolic Power and the Internet"; Nordin and Richaud, "Subverting Official Language and Discourse in China? Type River Crab for Harmony".

[70] For example, see <http://bbs.tianya.cn/postfree31915671.shtml>; <http://www.thinkread.cn/comment/8259/>; <http://www.21ccom.net/articles/thought/bianyan/20150309121954_all.html> [30 July 2015].

anew from the top as socialist theories. With their sole aim of justifying the legitimacy of the Party regime,[71] the meanings of these socialist theories were spelled out by Party theorists and existed only at the ideological level. They had no connection with and could not be translated into any grass-roots action. Furthermore, this top-down approach means that "Three Represents" and "Harmonious Society" had not sunk roots deeply into public sentiments. Despite efforts to appeal to public feelings (especially with harmony being a Confucian ideal), such a top-down manoeuvre ended up alienating the public, resulting in the theories being widely ridiculed.

In contrast, the meanings of "positive energy" were not fixed but were to be articulated in action; this leaves room for further discursive development of the phrase. Thus, by appropriating the phrase, the authorities articulate a political–national/global "positive energy" (notably patriotism and nationalism) that serves to shore up social and political stability. Equally, patriotism and nationalism can evoke positive feelings and attitudes in many ordinary Chinese, as a result of long-term, deep-rooted political socialisation (especially through education). In fact, the internet use in China is perceived by many to have promoted patriotism and nationalism.[72]

The authorities' intervention, however, should not be seen simply as adding an extra layer of meaning to it. Rather, it entails appropriating the expression and using it as a "nodal point" to create "chains of equivalence" to invoke the theoretical vocabulary of Laclau and Mouffe's as expounded earlier. In other words, as a "nodal point", "positive energy" links together elements otherwise scattered at different levels or domains, and accentuates their common significance as "positive". This operation renders previously unrelated elements, such as optimism/confidence (at personal level), charity/philanthropy (at societal level), and patriotism/nationalism (at political level), equivalent to each other in the sense that they are all "positive", thus dissolving or reducing the differences between the three levels. The boundaries between, say, confidence in the self and faith in the regime can thus be blurred or confused, resulting in a melting down of the antagonism that may otherwise exist between individual members of the public and the regime.

The articulation and propagation of "positive energy" necessarily create the category of "negative energy", which includes negative feelings on a personal or individual level, discursive elements that refer to the dark side of Chinese society/culture, and any discourse that criticises the political system or the Party-state. All such "negativities" are then seen as bad, and boycotted. The logic of equivalence also works in this case to create a conflation between negative feelings at the individual–personal level—which positive psychology instructs people to avoid at all costs—and critical feelings regarding societal–cultural and national–political issues. In other words, when a chain of equivalence is established through the nodal point of "negative energy", a likely outcome is that people are pressured into avoiding critical or negative feelings

[71] Holbig, "Remaking the CCP's Ideology".

[72] For example, MacKinnon, "Flatter World and Thicker Walls? "; Ma Yiben, "Online Chinese nationalism and its Nationalist Discourses", *Routledge Handbook of Chinese Media* (2015): 203.

about societal and political matters because such sentiments are stigmatised as "negative energy", which is to be avoided like negativities at the individual–personal level. A possible result of the equivalence is then an unconditionally non-critical sociopolitical subject in the name of avoiding "negative energy".

The successful establishment of such chains of equivalence relies firstly on the basic psychological needs of humans for positive feelings as mentioned earlier. In addition, the authors argue that one further source of legitimacy for the term lies in the cultural–ideological connotations associated with the Chinese character for "positive", i.e. *zheng* 正. As *zheng* also means righteousness, uprightness and incorruptibility, this character appears in many traditional Chinese idioms and sayings (such as *haoran zhengqi* 浩然正气 "noble righteousness"; *buzheng zhifeng* 不正之风 "malpractice"; *zhengren junzi* 正人君子 "man of integrity"). These idioms have been re-emphasised in Xi Jinping's ongoing anti-corruption campaign, which has garnered considerable popular approval and support. Not implausibly, this linguistically rooted cultural ideology surrounding positivity/*zheng* has further contributed towards the Chinese public's identification with *zheng nengliang*.

Nevertheless, while highlighting the effectiveness of the official appropriation and promotion of "positive energy" discourses as a case of hegemonic intervention, the authors do not wish to exaggerate it, for at least two reasons—one empirical and the other, theoretical. Empirically, as the term became increasingly associated with official propaganda, it should be acknowledged that more and more netizens may start to find it alienating. Arguably, such spontaneous popular enthusiasm around "positive energy" seen in 2012 has already shown signs of decline (Figure 1). As a discursive fad, it is also inevitable that "positive energy" will go out of fashion sooner or later, giving way to yet newer inventions.

Secondly and theoretically, an important criticism that has been levelled at Laclau and Mouffe's theory on discourse and hegemony suggests that it overstates the power of discursive rearticulation to bring about social changes, and that it pays insufficient attention to the non-discursive aspects of power relations or struggles.[73] In present-day China, the promotion of "positive energy" has been supported by measures requiring explicit coercive state power, such as judicial silencing of vocal internet personalities who spoke of sensitive issues (i.e. "negative energy").[74] In other cases, massive state resources have been mobilised, such as the deployment of millions of internet commentators as well as student volunteers to spread "positive energy".[75] In other words, while the *discursive* intervention stigmatises critical voices and labels them as "negative", *physical* resources and forces are deployed to spread "positive energy" and

[73] Lilie Chouliaraki and Norman Fairclough, *Discourse in Late Modernity Vol. 2* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999); see also Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

[74] For example, the "Big V" Charles Xue case; see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-24182336> [19 January 2018].

[75] See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/04/10/wanted-ten-million-chinese-students-to-civilize-the-internet/> [19 January 2018].

cleanse "negative energy" from Chinese mediasphere where the hegemonic struggle is played out. In short, discourse is not everything, and it does not operate in a purely symbolic space.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the authors documented and analysed in this article the ways in which the popular online expression "positive energy" was appropriated and promoted by the CPC party-state as an attempt towards hegemonic intervention into public (especially online) discourse in China. Using Laclau and Mouffe's theory on discourse and hegemony, the authors illustrated that the semantic versatility of the phrase allowed the authorities to use it to accomplish positive propaganda. Compared with previous hegemonic slogans promoted by the CPC party-state, this "positive energy" hegemonic intervention has achieved a notable degree of effectiveness.

A key significance of this article is the analysis of a case study beyond the typical control-vs-resistance narrative in the scholarship on Chinese internet/mediasphere, which tends to accentuate antagonism and conflict. With the concept of hegemony defined as the dissolution of antagonism and manufacture of consent, this study showcases a different kind of politics of the internet in China. Furthermore, the findings suggest that it is simplistic to view the internet as necessarily weakening the capacity of an authoritarian state to intervene in public discourse; the state may adapt to, or learn to take advantage of, the new media environment.

Nevertheless, it is not claimed here that the relative success of "positive energy" can be easily replicated in the future. The authors demonstrated that its key to success is the alignment of grass-roots meanings with those intended by the authorities for the purpose of regime legitimation. This alignment has made possible the hegemonic intervention. However, terms and catchphrases amenable to such alignment may be rare.

On a final note, the authors do not suggest that with "positive energy", the Chinese state has achieved near full media hegemony. In fact, it is acknowledged that hegemonic intervention has also met with some criticism and could well be a transient phenomenon, as has been the case for most online discourses in China's fast-evolving media and social landscapes. The Chinese Party-state has long emphasised positive propaganda in the realm of media, arts and cultural production,[76] and the case of "positive energy" is largely in line with this preexisting propaganda strategy. While "positive energy" may not represent a radically different approach towards propaganda and the governing of the internet in the Xi Jinping era, what was notable, indeed exceptional, about this hegemonic intervention is the manner in which the authoritarian state obtained a relatively successful outcome through appropriating a popular online catchphrase.

[76] In China, such positive propaganda is also known as "main melody" (*zhu xuanlü* 主旋律), referring to cultural productions that disseminate regime ideologies and values, or "positive reporting" (*zhengmian baodao* 正面报道) in the context of journalism.