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“Positive energy”: Hegemonic intervention and online media discourse in China’s Xi Jinping era

PEIDONG YANG and LIJUN TANG

Abstract
Scholarship to-date agrees that the internet has weakened the Chinese party-state’s ideological and discursive hegemony over society. In this paper, we document a recent intervention into public discourse exercised by the Chinese state through appropriating and promoting a popular online catchphrase—“positive energy” (*zheng nengliang*). Analyzing the “positive energy” phenomena using Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony and discourse, we 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.

Keywords “positive energy”; hegemony; propaganda; media/internet; discourse analysis; China

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> *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]
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> *Qiushi*, Organ of the Central Committee of Chinese Communist Party (2013)

Contemporary China's internet is a canivalisque space where neologisms, newfangled catchphrases and outlandish visual/textual memes get constantly invented, go viral, and then go out of fashion just as quickly.[2] Scholars have shown that often such online discursive phenomena are sociologically significant, and analyzing them can yield interesting insights into contemporary Chinese politics, society, and culture.[3] In this paper, we examine the recent catchphrase "positive energy" (*zheng nengliang* 正能量). In China, most popular internet expressions or discourses remain at lowbrow or "grassroots" (*caogen* 草根) level, and tend to be used only by ordinary netizens. What is extraordinary about "positive energy" is that it not only entered the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) official lexicon and discourse at the highest level (as the above *Qiushi* excerpt shows), but was indeed used publicly by Xi Jinping himself on multiple occasions since he became the CCP General Secretary in late 2012. We shall argue, much more than just another instance of Xi's idiosyncratic fondness of using "hot phrases",[4] "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"? One online article vaguely defines "positive energy" as "any uplifting power and emotion, representing hope".[5] With various origins in science, superstition, 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 rated "positive energy" No.1 among the "top ten catchphrases of the year".[6] Subsequently, the phrase was appropriated by the authorities, and started to appear frequently in various forms of official party-state communication and

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

[2] Gong, Haomin, and Xin Yang. "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; Nordin, Astrid, 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 Peidong Yang. "Symbolic Power and the Internet: The Power of a 'Horse'." *Media, Culture & Society* 33, no. 5 (2011): 675-91; Yang, Peidong, Lijun Tang, and Xuan Wang. "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] Bandurski, David. "Meeting Mr. "Hot Phrase"." (2015) http://cmp.hku.hk/2015/02/06/38107/

[5] http://www.chinanews.com/cul/2012/08-22/4126061.shtml (accessed 23 July 2015).

[6] http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1118565/positive-energy-chosen-number-one-chinese-catchphrase-year (accessed 17 August 2015).

publication. In this official appropriation, it has come to refer to attitudes or emotions that are aligned with the ideological or value systems of the CCP 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 the Chinese society and politics is considered "positive energy", because it encourages the mass's identification with the regime. Yet, despite official appropriation, the public seems to continue embracing the catchphrase. 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 internet would lead to democratization. It has become increasingly clear that such a hypothesis is naïve, and the Chinese authoritarian state has proven to be 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, draconian suppressions, coupled with a certain degree of pragmatic tolerance.[9] From a Gramscian perspective, the CCP party-state is said to be confronted with a serious "crisis of hegemony".[10] Furthermore, 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 the interesting question as to whether, in the age of online media, an authoritarian state such as China's 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 the online mediasphere. In this context, the case of "positive energy" as we shall document and analyze, stands out as a rare one in which the CCP party-state cleverly hijacked an internet catchphrase for its own agenda of hegemonizing internet discourse, or at least to intervene hegemonically in it. Most

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

[8] Shie, Tamara Renee. "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; Jianhai Bi, 'The Internet revolution in China: the significance for traditional forms of communist control', *International Journal* 56(3), (2001), pp. 421–441; Qiang Xiao, 'The Internet: a force to transform Chinese society?', in Lionel M. Jensen and Timothy B. Weston, eds, *China's Transformation: The Stories Beyond the Headlines* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), pp. 129–143; Latham, Kevin. "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*, edited by Eric Florence and Pierre Defraigne, 203-17. London and New York Routledge, 2013.

[9] King, Gary, 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; MacKinnon, Rebecca. "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 Shaohua Lei. "War of Position and Microblogging in China." *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 80 (2013): 292-311.

[11] Zheng, Technological Empowerment; Kalathil and Boas, Open Networks, Closed Regimes; Tamara Renee Shie, 'The tangled web: does the Internet offer promise or peril for the Chinese Communist Party?', *Journal of Contemporary China* 13(40), (2004), pp. 523–540.

notably, this was arguably done with a good measure of effectiveness. Examining this case thus provides us 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 rest of this paper, we first explain our theoretical perspective based on the Gramscian notion of hegemony and Laclacu and Mouffe's post-Marxist development of hegemony theory in relation to discourse. This is followed by a discussion of the internet and propaganda in China. Subsequently, we 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 trending Chinese discourses. In the discussion section, we address how this "positive energy" discursive hegemonization is achieved, in conjunction with some observations on the developments in media and internet control since China entered the Xi era. Finally, we briefly conclude.

Discourse and hegemony: "nodal point" and "chain of equivalence"

Theorizing 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 recognizes 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]

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 emphasizing the indeterminacy of sign/signification, Laclau and Mouffe famously developed a social theory of hegemony centered 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 reject such materialist determinism and argue

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

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

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

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

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 *moment*s. "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 manners in which "democracy" and "rule of law" are understood in liberal capitalism. The practice that establishes relations between elements and stabilizes 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 antagonistically; and those attempts to establish hegemony may be called *hegemonic interventions*.

Just as a discourse cannot crystallize 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 hail from different social groups and backgrounds (e.g. farmers, workers, and small business owners), the revolutionary articulation dissolves their differences and render their positions *equivalent*, 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

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

17 Rear, David, 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, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso, 2001, p.xii.

coalition, make members perceive their diverging interests, and hence dissolve the revolutionary hegemony.

Hegemony, propaganda, and internet/online media in China

The above theoretical formulations on hegemony remain highly pertinent to China. As Xiaobo Su has shown, both in China's Communist revolution and in the post-1949 Socialist construction, the CCP 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 hegemonization, finally 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 CCP 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 liberalized. Although in reform-era China, the propaganda machine has reinvented itself and continues to be extensively deployed to serve the evolving needs of the CCP party-state,[21] there can be little doubt that its capacity to hegemonize 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 CCP departments 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 9 million internet users at the beginning of 2000,[23] by February 2015, there were said to be as many as 557 million mobile internet users, and a total of 649 million netizens in China.[24] For vast numbers of Chinese citizens, particularly the relatively young and educated urbanites, the internet has become the preeminent communicative medium and a crucial dimension to their citizenship, socialization, and identity expression.[25] Furthermore, in

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

21 Ibid.

22 Tsai, Wen-Hsuan, and Peng-Hsiang Kao. "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 grassroots CCP 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), available at: http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/hlwtjbg/201206/t20120612_26725.htm (accessed 9 September 2015).

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

25 Liu, Fengshu. *Urban Youth in China: Modernity, the Internet and the Self*. London and New York: Routledge 2011; Latham, Kevin. "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*, edited by Eric Florence and Pierre Defraigne, 203-17. London and New York Routledge, 2013.

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 our current investigation of discourse and hegemony in China.

The Chinese online space is characterised by a paradoxical combination of, indeed tension between, 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 the Chinese cyberspace have noted that the state censorship regime is sophisticated enough to tolerate some critical voices and dissenting views, so long as these provided 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, this scholarship emphasizes antagonism and conflict in China's cyberspace, and these online antagonism and conflict reflect the contradictions existing in real in Chinese society.

What this confrontation/conflict-focused analytical approach neglects are alternative logics to politics of discourse and media. As discussed in the previous section, hegemony is the discursive dissolution of antagonism and the creation of

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26 Latham, Kevin. "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) https://opennet.net/research/profiles/china.

29 Tsui, Lokman. "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.

30 Herold, David K. "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, Gary, 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.

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 Herold, David K., 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, Gary, 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; Li, Shubo. "The Online Public Space and Popular Ethos in China." *Media, Culture & Society* 32, no. 1 (2010): 63-83; MacKinnon, Rebecca. "Flatter World and Thicker Walls? Blogs, Censorship and Civic Discourse in China." *Public Choices* 134, no. 1-2 (2008): 31-46; Tsui, Lokman. "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.

34 E.g. Hassid, Jonathan. "Safety Valve or Pressure Cooker? Blogs in Chinese Political Life." *Journal of Communication* 62, no. 2 (2012): 212-30; Yang (2009).

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 some scholars' efforts to highlight the importance of the former more sophisticated approach to "guiding" public opinion/discourse,[35] scholarly attention to hegemonic intervention has been inadequate so far.

To be sure, we are 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 utilized similar conceptual frameworks, but they all focus on the *counter-hegemonic* articulatory practices of Chinese netizens or online opinion leaders, bringing into relief the CCP 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 CCP propaganda slogans and propagandist news programs, 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, our above literature review identifies three interrelated arguments or patterns in existing scholarship. First, post-Mao CCP 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 CCP part-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 we deal with in the rest of this paper, presents a case of state-initiated hegemonic intervention that arguably unsettles all three received wisdoms.

A note on method and data

The term "positive energy" attracted the attention of one of the authors when it was announced to be the top catchphrase of the year at the end of 2012. Since then, he has been collecting news reports related to this 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 paper, we subsequently performed searches in a more schematic manner

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

36 Gleiss, Marielle Stigum. "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, Yanqi, and Shaohua Lei. "War of Position and Microblogging in China." *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 80 (2013): 292-311.

37 Tang, Lijun, and Peidong Yang. "Symbolic Power and the Internet: The Power of a 'Horse'." *Media, Culture & Society* 33, no. 5 (2011): 675-91; Tang, Lijun. "The Politics of Flies: Mocking News in Chinese Cyberspace." *Chinese Journal of Communication* 6, no. 4 (2013): 482-96; Esarey, Ashley, and Xiao Qiang. "Political Expression in the Chinese Blogosphere: Below the Radar." *Asian Survey* 48, no. 5 (2008): 752-72.

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 providing 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, we 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 censorship. Baidu is the top Chinese searching engine, and Baidu News enabled us to 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 energy", we believe filtering or censorship has had minimal impact on our research results. This is because, as our argument goes, the Chinese state in fact actively promoted the term's popularization instead of suppressing it.

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

The "positive energy" evolution and explosion: from science, superstition, 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 origins and development of the term and discern the various meanings attached to it.

"Positive energy" became a popular catchphrase in 2012, but its media presence dates back earlier. Figure 1 below is created based on CNKI database. It shows, 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, 2012 suddenly saw the term gain massive traction, to be followed by steadily high levels of visibility from 2013 up to the present, although the phenomenon is arguably showing signs of tailing off most recently. This pattern was corroborated by our searches on the internet using Baidu search engine too.

(Figure 1. "Positive energy" in major Chinese newspapers since 2000) [see end of the manuscript]

Pre-2012 usages: origins, meanings, development

Our investigations show that, prior to 2012, there were broadly four meanings or ways in which the term "positive energy" had been used: (1) as a layman's appropriation of a supposedly scientific jargon; (2) as a concept associated with Chinese superstitions; (3) as a way to refer to acts of charity/philanthropy; and (4) 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 we found was in a 2003 article that advertised a stock trading software.[39] In explaining one of the modeling 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".

As an interesting juxtaposition to this purportedly scientific provenance of the term, "positive energy" also appeared in relation to Chinese superstitions. In a 2007 article which was first carried 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 brings different kinds of energy. Therefore, we have to learn about those correct lighting arrangements that bring positive energy, and bring the family good fortune".[41]

The third usage of "positive energy" was to refer to acts of charity or the positive effects charitable acts bring about in the society. This was witnessed, for example, in the name of a youth volunteer group founded in Hong Kong in 2004 there: "Green Apple Positive Energy Youth Team", for which the Hong Kong superstar Andy Lau acted as the patron.[42] And finally, the fourth pre-2012 meaning in which the term "positive energy" had been circulating online was to do with personal emotional and psychological matters. Often spoken in opposition to "negative energy" (*fu nengliang* 负能量), which refers to the negative emotions or attitudes following trials and tribulations in personal life, "positive energy" means optimism, positive attitudes and emotions that help individuals overcome these difficulties or hardships. It is noteworthy that all 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, we 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 popularizing this term in the Chinese mainland through entertainment news reporting focused on them.

2012: popularization

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

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

[39] http://finance.sina.com.cn/roll/20030808/1846399224.shtml (accessed 25 July 2015).

[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 its consequences for the fortunes of people and/or places.

[41] http://news.163.com/07/1107/09/3SMH6A2E000120GU.html (accessed 25 July 2015).

[42] http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2004-06-27/19052922284s.shtml (accessed 25 July 2015).

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

The first event was the 2012 London Olympics. Among the eighteen Chinese who were invited to take part in that year's Olympics torch relay,[44] eight particularly stood out in the eyes of the Chinese public. Instead of being elite public figures, these eight were "grassroots" (*caogen*) Chinese citizens who distinguished themselves by embodying social conscience, civic spirit, and morally laudable conducts. For example, among them was a Xinjiang Uyghur man who earned a modest living by selling barbequed 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 recognized nationwide for their morally exemplary conduct and/or public contributions in fields such as education, environmental protectionism, 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 grassroots, and make more Chinese people understand the meaning of positive energy. China needs more positive energy, more brave and kind-hearted people; the positive energy contained in their bodies will give the 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 the values of equality, justice, and harmony.[46]

A second event accounting for the popularization of "positive energy" in 2012 was the translation and publication of British positive psychology guru Richard Wiseman's book *Rip It Up* in China as *Positive Energy* 正能量. As a book that claims to offer a new approach towards 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 we examined previously. However, in comparing the book's original version in English and its Chinese translation, we 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

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[44] http://www.china.com.cn/sports/txt/2012-07/11/content_25879298.htm (accessed 26 July 2015).
[45] http://blog.cntv.cn/18950958-3961614.html (accessed 27 July 2015).
[46] http://blog.cntv.cn/18950958-3961614.html (accessed 27 July 2015).
[47] Similarly, we found that although a book entitled Communication of Positive Energy 沟通正能量

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.

Since 2012: official appropriation and promotion

One observant Chinese commentator pointed out a curious fact about *Rip It Up/Positive Energy* in an online essay: while *Rip It Up* was first published on 5 July 2012 in English by the publisher Macmillan, the Chinese version *Positive Energy* came out as soon as on 1 August 2012, with less than a month in between.[48] Remarking "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 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 create a harmonious society through kindhearted deeds and moral behaviors.[50] An 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-U.S. cooperative partnership based on mutual respect and mutual benefit."[52] Barely a week later, when Wang Qishan, Member of the Standing Committee of the CCP Politburo, visited the United States, he followed Xi in also using "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 we quoted at the beginning of this paper, *Qiushi*, the organ of the CCP Central Committee, carried an article on 16 June 2013 under the title "Beware of Negative Energy on the Internet".[54] Denouncing "negative energy" in the form of negative news and other critical online content that make people disillusioned or cynical towards the

(http://product.dangdang.com/23519105.html) came out 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 title of any of his original books in English.

48 http://www.21ccom.net/articles/thought/bianyan/20150309121954_all.html (accessed 27 July 2015).

49 The one example we found indicating the CCP's direct endorsement of *Rip It Up* was an article in the 5 November 2013's *Xinhua Daily* (CCP's oldest national newspaper dating back to before the PRC's founding) under the 'CPC News – Theory' section. See http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/1105/c40531-23441342.html (accessed 28 July 2015).

50 http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2012-04/07/nw.D110000zgqnb_20120407_4-03.htm (accessed 27 July 2015).

51 http://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2012-09-04/01207578481.shtml (accessed 27 July 2015).

52 http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-12/13/c_132039163.htm (accessed 27 July 2015).

53 http://www.voachinese.com/content/xi-jinping-wang-qishan-20121220/1568796.html (accessed 27 July 2015).

54 http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2013/201312/201306/t20130613_239399.htm (accessed 23 July 2015).

Party and government, the article advocates boycotting "negative energy" and encourages netizens to become transmitters of "positive energy" to create hopefulness and uplifting attitudes. Espousing essentially the same logic, an editorial piece in the 9 July 2013's *People's Daily* appeared under the headline "Use the new media well, to promote positive energy."[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 over an important Forum on Literature and Arts in Beijing, one that was reminiscent of the landmark 1942 Yan'an Forum on Literature and Arts at which Mao Zedong cast the role of creative work under Chinese socialism as one of serving politics. At the end of this 2014 Forum, Xi made a point to greet two popular but controversial young bloggers who were known for their stridently patriotic and nationalistic writings, saying to them "I hope you will create more works with positive energy."[56] A *Quishi* article published on 3 February 2015 says sternly, "Teachers must spread positive energy in the classroom".[57] During the 13th Shangri-La Forum taking place in Singapore May-June 2014, the People's Liberation Army Deputy Chief-of-Staff Wang Guanzhong reassured the Forum 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, we are in a position to advance the following definition of the term 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 of individuals 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.

Furthermore, by tracing its trajectory we identify 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 popularized by Hong Kong celebrities facing personal trials and tribulations and the positive psychology sense of the term. The characteristics of "positive energy" discourses at this level are that they tend to be inward-looking, introspective, reflective, often underpinned by an individualistic ethos.

The literary form in which "positive energy" of this hue is typically carried is commonly known in Chinese sociolinguistic contexts as "chicken soup" (*jitang* 鸡汤).

55 http://opinion.people.com.cn/n/2013/0709/c1003-22128956.html (accessed 28 July 2015).
56 http://news.china.com/domestic/945/20141016/18863497_all.html (accessed 28 July 2015).
57 http://www.qstheory.cn/wp/2015-02/03/c_1114240287.htm (accessed 28 July 2015).
58 http://www.chinanews.com/mil/2014/06-01/6235104.shtml (accessed 28 July 2015).

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. One good example of this is the popular mobile phone chat application WeChat's subscription function of *Chinese Readers' Digest Selections*. The latter regularly updates the 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. The slogan of this Readers' Digest is "Share big wisdom; spread positive energy" 分享大智慧 传播正能量.

Societal-Cultural

The second level is the *societal-cultural*. "Positive energy" on this level encompasses all the examples we examined previously relating to acts of charity, exemplary moral conduct, social conscience, civic virtues, and so forth. We call this category *societal-cultural* because "positive energy" discourses on this level pertain primarily to social interactions/relations, are almost always about moral/ethical issues arising from society, and are essentially underpinned by human value systems, be they universal or culturally specific. This category of "positive energy" discourses, we estimate, accounts for the majority of internet and social media contents tagged with this label. And we believe that this is because "positive energy" in this connotation enjoys 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 institutionalized/ 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", perhaps most succinctly describes this genre of journalism. In April 2015, ifeng.com, possibly the most dynamic and progressive of China's large media companies, created a section called "warm story" 暖新闻 dedicated to news stories that supposedly warm people's hearts with "positive energy".[59] Most of these "warm stories" are big or small "good people good deeds" narratives. Apparently, ifeng.com set a national trend: by now, many influential national internet portals such as sohu.com, 163.com, Xinhua News, and numerous provincial/local portals, feature "warm story" sections. In all cases, the explicit mission of these sections is to "pass on positive energy" 传递正能量. No doubt, the promotion of such "positive energy" news by the media falls neatly in line with the party-state's policy.

Political-National/Global

The third and grandest level of discourse at which "positive energy" has been operating is what we venture to call the *political-national/global*, because discourses of this kind are characterized by the explicit ways in which they pertain 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 CCP Party

[59] http://news.ifeng.com/listpage/70374/1/list.shtml (accessed 29 July 2015).

Congress of 2012 which saw the transition of power to the Xi Jinping leadership, the notion of Core Socialist Values 社会主义核心价值观 was raised to encompass most, if not all, of such politically and ideologically-oriented "positive" values.[60]

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 CCP 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, also raised at the 18th Party Congress was the slogan of "Three Self-Confidence" 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.

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.

[Table 1. Current "positive energy" in Chinese mediasphere - a three-level analysis] (see end of the manuscript)

Although we separate "positive energy" into three categories in the above 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 the recipient or

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

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

[64] See note 71.

transmitter of "positive energy" can mobilize different types simultaneously and across boundaries. For instance, an individual person afflicted with "negative energy" may try to gain "positive energy" not only by practicing an introspective self-examination/improvement (i.e. individual-personal), but also by becoming more optimistic and hopeful about the society/culture (i.e. societal-cultural) and the nation-state and global world (i.e. political-national/global) in which they live. In fact, such boundary/category-crossing lies at the heart of the relative effectiveness of the "positive energy" discursive intervention, as we turn to discuss next.

Discussion

Deng Xiaoping's reform 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 CCP leaderships were faced with the increasingly challenging task of producing mass consent amidst mounting social antagonisms. Both Xi's predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, propagated their own brands of hegemonic theoretical systems, respectively under the labels of "Three Represents" Theory 三个代表重要思想 and "Harmonious Society" 和谐社会.[67] The former advocated, at its core, that the CCP represented the most fundamental interest of the greatest masses, whereas the latter envisioned a society in which all interests are in harmony under the leadership of the Party.

Yet, both catchphrases encountered significant discursive counter-hegemonic resistance in the Chinese cyberspace. With "Three Represents" homophonically ridiculed by netizens as "wearing three watches" (戴三个表),[68] and similarly "Harmonious Society" as "river crab" (河蟹),[69] these two expressions spawned a large amount of online satiric texutal production. As attempts to create mass consent and discursive hegemony, thus, both were evidently failures. In contrast, in the recent case of "positive energy", we find 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 grassroots 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 have been remarkably more effective than previous slogans of hegemonic intent. Why has this been the case?

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65 Deng famously said: 'Development is the absolute principle' (fazhan caishi ying daoli); See also Su, Xiaobo. "Revolution and Reform: The Role of Ideology and Hegemony in Chinese Politics." *Journal of Contemporary China* 20, no. 69 (2011): 307-26.

66 Wang, Hui. *The End of the Revolution: China and the Limits of Modernity*. London: Verso, 2011.

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

68 Esarey, Ashley, and Xiao Qiang. "Political Expression in the Chinese Blogosphere: Below the Radar." *Asian Survey* 48, no. 5 (2008): 752-72.

69 Tang, Lijun, and Peidong Yang. "Symbolic Power and the Internet: The Power of a 'Horse'." *Media, Culture & Society* 33, no. 5 (2011): 675-91; Nordin, Astrid, and Lisa Richaud. "Subverting Official Language and Discourse in China? Type River Crab for Harmony." *China Information* 28, no. 1 (2014): 47-67.

70 E.g.: http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-3191567-1.shtml;
http://www.thinkread.cn/comment/8259/;
http://www.21ccom.net/articles/thought/bianyan/20150309121954_all.html (accessed 30 July 2015).

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 existing discourse, the general public has already attached certain meanings to “positive energy”. Furthermore, these meanings are not explicitly defined in text as we do in this paper, but are articulated through action, that is, making and spreading “positive energy” posts online. Thus, from the beginning, “positive energy” entails, as well as points to certain directions for, grassroots participation. Second, the initial popularty 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 means they 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 anew from the top as socialist theories. With the sole aim to justify the legitimacy of the party regime[71], their meanings were spelled out by party theorists and exisited only at the ideological level. They had no connection with and could not be translated into any grassroots action. Furthermore, the top down approach means that they were not springing out of public sentiments. Maybe they were intended to appeal to public feelings (especially considering “Harmounious Society” draws upon Confucius philosophy), but top down appealing is no guarantee of success. Instead, the ideological purpose appears to alienate the people, resulting in the terms being widely ridiculed.

As the meanings of “positive energy” are not fixed but articulated in action, it leaves room for further expansion. Thus, through it, the authorities take the opportunity to articulate a political-national/global “positive energy”, which is more directly in the service of political stability such as patriotism and nationalism. Equally, patriotism and nationalism can evoke positive feelings and attitudes among many ordinary Chinese people, as a result of long-term, deep-rooted political socialization (especially through education). In fact, the Internet use in China has seen by many to have promoted patriotism and nationalism[72].

The intervention of the authorities, 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 accentuate their common significance as being “positive”. This operation renders previously unrelated elements, such as optimism/confidence (personal-level), charity/philanthropy (societal-level), and patriotism/nationalism (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,

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

72 E.g. MacKinnon, Rebecca. "Flatter world and thicker walls? Blogs, censorship and civic discourse in China." *Public Choice* 134, no. 1-2 (2008): 31-46; Ma, Yiben. "Online Chinese nationalism and its nationalist discourses."*Routledge Handbook of Chinese Media* (2015): 203.

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". "Negativities" such as negative feelings on a personal or individual level, discursive elements that refer to the dark side of the Chinese society/culture, and any discourse that criticizes the political system or the party-state, are all labeled "negative energy", seen as being bad, and boycotted. The logic of equivalence works here too to create a conflation between negative feelings at the individual-personal level, which positive psychology instructs people to avoid at all cost, 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 pressurized into avoiding critical or negative feelings about societal and political matters, as such sentiments are stigmatized as "negative energy", something to avoid just like negativities on the individual-personal level. A possible outcome of this 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 basic psychological needs of humans for positive feelings as we mentioned earlier. In addition, we speculate 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. With *zheng* also meaning righteousness, uprightness and incorruptibility, this character appears in many traditional Chinese idioms and sayings (such as *haoran zhengqi* 浩然正气; *buzheng zhifeng* 不正之风; *zhengren junzi* 正人君子) which have been re-emphasized in Xi Jinping's ongoing anti-corruption campaign—a campaign that has garnered considerable popular approval and support. Not implausibly, this linguistically-rooted cultural ideology surrounding positivity/*zheng* further contributes towards the Chinese public's identification with *zheng nengliang*.

Although we highlight the relative effectiveness of the official appropriation and promotion of "positive energy" discourses as a case of hegemonic intervention, we do not wish to exaggerate it, for at least two reasons, one empirical and one theoretical. Empirically, it should be acknowledged, as the term became increasingly associated with official propaganda, more and more netizens may start to find it alienating. Arguably, the kind of spontaneous popular enthusiasm around "positive energy" seen in 2012 is already showing signs of subsiding (see 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, one important criticism that has been leveled at Laclau and Mouffe's theory on discourse and hegemony suggests that it overstates the power of discursive rearticulation to bring about social change, and that it pays insufficient attention to the non-discursive dimensions to power relations or struggles.[73] In present-

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

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 mobilized, 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 stigmatizes critical voices and labels them as "negative", *physical* resources and forces are deployed to spread "positive energy" and cleanse "negative energy" from the Chinese mediasphere where the hegemonic struggle is played out. Discourse is not everything, and it does not operate in a purely symbolic space.

Conclusion

To conclude, in this paper, we documented and analyzed the ways in which the recent popular online expression "positive energy" was appropriated and promoted by the CCP party-state as an attempt of hegemonic intervention into public (especially online) discourse in China. Using Laclau and Mouffe's theory on discourse and hegemony, we 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 CCP party-state, this "positive energy" hegemonic intervention has achieved a notable degree of effectiveness.

A key significance of this paper lies in providing a case study that went 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, which is the dissolution of antagonism and manufacture of consent, this study showcased a different kind of politics of the internet in China. Furthermore, our 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, we do not claim that the relative success of "positive energy" can be easily replicated in the future. As we have shown, the key to success is the alignment of meanings as articulated in grassroots participation out of intuitive human inclinations with those intended by the authorities for the purpose of regime legitimation. It is this alignment that makes possible the hegemonic intervention. Arguably, terms and catchphrases that can achieve such alignment would not be easy to find.

Finally, we do not suggest that with "positive energy" the Chinese state has achieved anything near full media hegemony. In fact, we acknowledge that this hegemonic intervention has also met with some criticism and could well be a transient phenomenon, as most online discourses are in China's fast evolving media and social landscapes. The Chinese party-state has long emphasized positive propaganda in the realm of media, arts and cultural production,[76] and the case of "positive energy" is

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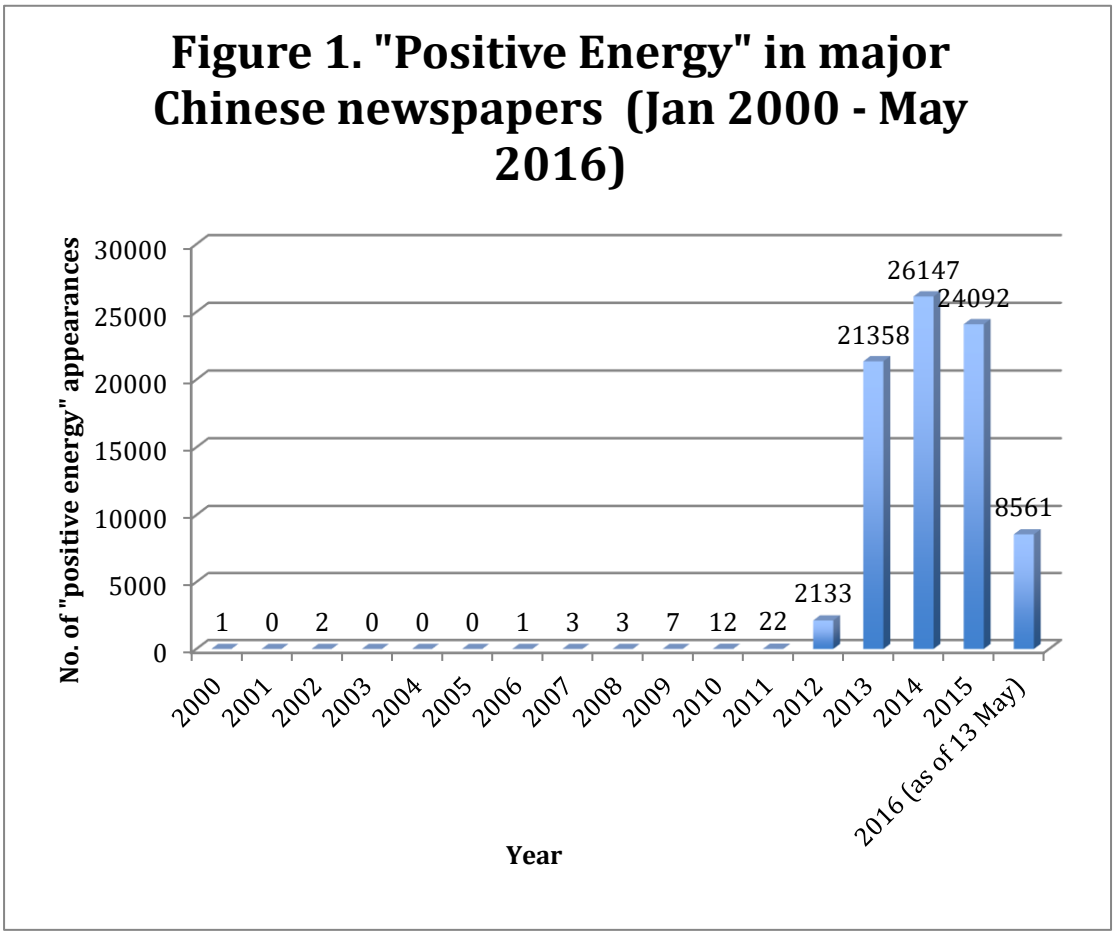
74 E.g. the 'Big V' Charles Xue case; http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-24182336

75https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/04/10/wanted-ten-million-chinese-students-to-civilize-the-internet/

76 In China, such positive propaganda is also known as "main melody" (*zhu xuanlu* 主旋律), referring to cultural productions that disseminate regime ideologies and values, or "positive reporting" (*zhengmian baodao* 正面报道)

largely in line of this pre-existing propaganda strategy. While "positive energy" may not represent a radically different approach towards propaganda and the governing of the internet in Xi Jinping era China, what was notable, indeed exceptional, about this hegemonic intervention is the manner in which the authoritarian state obtained a relatively more successful outcome through appropriating a popular online catchphrase.



in the context of journalism

Table 1. Current "positive energy" in Chinese mediasphere - a three-level analysis

Level	Positive Energy	Positive values encouraged
Individual – Personal	*Characteristic*: inward-looking; introspective; reflective; individualistic; *Typical forms*: "Chicken soup" essays/books (mini essays conveying wisdom and positive thinking); words of wisdom; *Example*: Readers' Digest; *Rip It Up*; 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; …
Societal – Cultural	*Characteristic*: Social interactions/relations-oriented; interactive; ethical; moral; *Typical forms*: Journalism; TV programs *Example*: "Warm News" "Touching China" (TV show);	Virtually all moral virtues a social person can have: filial piety; respect; helpfulness; philanthropy; compassion; dedication to work; altruism/selflessness; love; trust; integrity/honesty;
Political – National/global	*Characteristic*: Political issues-oriented; concerning national/global issues *Typical forms*: State-sponsored journalism; TV; specialized publications (e.g. scholarly books; academic papers) *Example*: Works by pro-regime scholars/intellectuals such as Zhang Weiwei and Martin Jacques; "Three Self-Confidences"; "Peaceful Rise"; "New type of major power relation".	Nationalism; Patriotism; Socialism with Chinese characteristics; Core Socialist Values; Confidence/pride in the Chinese political system, in Chinese culture;