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THE ELITIST PUBLIC SPHERE IN CHINA: A CASE STUDY OF ONLINE CONTESTATION BY FORMER CRITICAL JOURNALISTS DURING THE CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

Sally Xiaojin Chen

This paper explores a contingent sub-public sphere promoted by a group of former critical journalists in China during the coronavirus outbreak at the beginning of 2020. During the initial outbreak of coronavirus in China, the observed former journalists, who left the field of critical journalism during the re-structure of Chinese news industries under Xi Jinping’s leadership, drew on their knowledge of Chinese politics and censorship to contest information cover-up by the state, online censorship, and the state’s discourses of China as a successful model of combating the virus. Their activities effectively engaged mass participation of Chinese people and promoted critical opinions of the public. The paper bears the primary aim to deepen the understanding of the episodic formation of elite-driven public spheres in China by investigating the nuances of each case. I therefore, in this particular case study, explore concepts of habitus and capital from Bourdieu’s field theory as analytical tools in the investigation of the persistence of political participation and government scrutiny by former critical journalists on social media after leaving the field of critical journalism. The empirical research combines materials collected through 15 former critical journalists’ WeChat accounts between January and May 2020, along with in-depth interviews.

KEYWORDS Chinese journalists; coronavirus; COVID-19; public sphere; field theory; WeChat

Introduction

This paper focuses on a number of former critical journalists in China and a contingent sub-public sphere they constructed on social media at the beginning of 2020 during the coronavirus outbreak. Existing studies characterise Chinese critical journalistic activities as pushing the boundaries of the permissible and critically engaging with contentious governance, and in this way channelling supervision on political governance (Repnikova 2017; Tong 2019). The former critical journalists referred to in this paper were previously employed by some of the most influential market-facing news outlets in China, acting in various roles including investigative journalists, editors of current affair investigations, authors of critical editorials, and editor-in-chief of liberal news magazines, and were self-identified as critical or liberal journalists. They had engaged in critical reporting and commentary writing on current affairs and social issues and demonstrated traits of advocate journalists (Hassid 2011) in their previous professional activities. Their previous
employers include *Southern Metropolitan Daily* (nanfang dushibao), *Southern Weekly* (nanfang zhoumo), *Southern People Weekly* (nanfang renwu zhoukan), *Twenty-first Century Economic Report* (21shiji jingji baodao), *Southern Metropolitan Weekly* (nandu zhoukan), *Caijing*, and *Blog Weekly* (boke tianxia). These journalists have all since changed careers during the restructure of China’s news industries under Xi Jinping’s leadership (2012-present), leaving critical journalism behind, and a large proportion of them now work in commercial roles for China’s booming digital economy.

During the initial outbreak of coronavirus in China starting in December 2019, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) exercised relentless censoring of online information and an intensifying propaganda campaign to promote the state’s success in fighting the virus, which triggered many former critical journalists to readopt their skills of criticising and challenging authorities on social media. The observed former journalists drew on their knowledge of Chinese politics and censorship to promote critical opinions around the information cover-up and the state’s conscious narrative construction through their wide social networks in this national crisis. They collectively criticised the tightened media control under Xi’s leadership that, as they claimed, contributed to the inability of critical journalists to effectively investigate and inform the public about the virus outbreak. This paper aims to explore the nuanced contentious activities on social media from this group of former journalists within the theoretical framework of the public sphere in China.

I will first conceptualise a contingent and elite-driven public sphere in China. To assist my analysis of the public communication taking place in this contingent public sphere during the coronavirus outbreak, I will then borrow the concepts of habitus and cultural capital from the field theory introduced by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Crossley (2004) argues for the combination of Habermas’s public sphere and Bourdieu’s field theory for deepening the understanding of how individuals’ social position and cultural capital shape the ways of public communication they opt for. In a similar vein, I consider the concept of habitus particularly useful for making sense of the persistence of political participation and government scrutiny by former critical journalists on social media after they have left critical journalism. The review of their cultural and social capitals also helps understand the style and forms of contestation pursued by these individuals. These concepts therefore complement the theoretical exploration of the elitist public sphere in China. The empirical analysis of this paper combines materials collected through 15 former critical journalists’ WeChat moments from January to May 2020, along with in-depth interviews.

**The Elite-driven Public Sphere in China**

The public sphere is perhaps one of the most debateable concepts in studying communications on Chinese social media. The Habermasian public sphere is an ideal of civic participation in deliberative democracy and was briefly realised in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European societies (Habermas 1989). In the Chinese context, it has been anticipated that online forums and microblogging services have the capacities to construct the Chinese public sphere through developing online communities for the general public and particular social groups (e.g. environmental social groups and LGBTQ+ communities, see G. Yang and Calhoun 2007; Sima 2011; Chen 2020b), promoting online activism (Yang 2009; 2014a; Chen 2020a), nurturing media citizenship (Yu 2006), and facilitating negotiation between the state and society over certain issues (Yang and Calhoun 2007;
Tong and Lei 2013; Yang 2019). These expectations have however been challenged by both the general concerns relating to the political economy of the internet and more specific criticisms around the control and manipulation of public opinions on the internet by the Chinese state.

Firstly, the digital divide critique (Norris 2001) is concerned that online contestations that challenge the authorities in China remain an elitist pursuit of the urban population who are university graduates and working as journalists, lawyers, academics, entrepreneurs and so on, and thus hardly represent the majority of Chinese population who are rural and easily distracted by online infotainment (Leibold 2011). The elitist discourses online may cause further social fragmentation in China (Leibold 2011). Whilst arguing optimistically for the emergence of media citizenship in China in earlier case studies, Yu (2006, 309) also makes the case that Chinese “netizens,” namely, citizens on the internet who exercise citizenship by discussing and petitioning, only constitute the “minoritised community” online.

Secondly, the Chinese Communist Party operates the most sophisticated machinery for internet control, which is detrimental to the non-state-interference principle of the Habermasian public sphere. From the early days, the state licencing policy centrally controls internet service providers (via the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology of the People’s Republic of China [MIIT], see Deibert et al. 2010). The so-called national security projects - the Great Firewall and the Golden Shield – centrally block and filter information transferring from both overseas and domestic networks (Xiao 2011). The propaganda department and State Council Information Office (SCIO) of multiple levels ensure that censorship and self-censorship are efficiently enforced, particularly through the implementation of constantly updating policies that legitimise surveillance and imprisonment (Zittrain and Edelman 2003; Yang 2009; Xiao 2011; Malcolm 2013; Chen 2020a; Wright 2014). Xi Jinping’s leadership has successfully launched national campaigns that aim to sanitise and mould online expression as part of the effort to establish the political narrative of the “Chinese dream,” explained by Xi as the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (Yang 2014b). In 2014, the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission was established to ensure all-encompassing control of the internet, with Xi himself as the leader. Whilst social media companies are incentivised by the pursuit of market profits in the promotion of social contentions of certain events, they are also required to self-censor and toe the Party line. As such, social media in China is hardly an autonomous public sphere against the state.

Thirdly, online contestations have been criticised for involving only clicktivism (Morozov 2009) rather than meaningful political action, and ultimately contributing to what Dean (2003; 2005; 2010) has called communicative capitalism. Dean argues that online content does not request responses from the authorities but only contributes to people’s fetishist obsession for information quantity. Indeed, current online contestation in China often is emotively engaged with by the public and short-lived, resulting in limited policy changes (Tong 2015a; Chen 2020a).

Acknowledging that Chinese social media are hybrid spaces mixing control and contention (Yang 2009; 2014a), emotion and agonism (Tong 2015a), manipulation and resistance (Chen 2020a), this paper does not naively pursue the idealist model of the public sphere that is rational, independent, critical, and accessible to all social members (Habermas 1989). It is worth noting that the Habermasian public sphere was primarily promoted by elitist groups consisting of bankers, intellectuals, doctors, lawyers, and other social elites,
who demanded a form of political power that was consistent with their economic status in
the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Kocka 1995). What characterised the public
sphere at the time was not its inclusiveness (Fraser 1990), but its resistant nature of oppos-
ing the autocracy and central power of feudal regimes. With similar emphasis, this paper
believes that there have emerged distinct elitist public spheres on Chinese social media
during particular events, which have been able to engage mass participation of Chinese
people at particular times (Chen 2020a). Previous case studies have evidenced that the
elite-led contestations successfully inspired non-elite groups in particular events to
demand the right to be informed and to express their opinions (Yu 2006; Chen 2020a).
Even though mass participation was often emotional and fragmented in these events,
the populist turns frequently promoted by these events facilitated embodied experiences
of individuals that spoke to their memories and thus allowed popular sentiments to be
addressed (Chen 2020a). The political effects are in this sense not demonstratable by tan-
gible changes in policies, for which Jodi Dean forcefully argues, but embedded in the for-
mation of citizenship and civic connectivity, and ultimately a viable formation of the public
sphere in China.

It is in this context that this paper argues for the importance to conduct nuanced
studies of events that facilitate the episodic appearance of the sub-public sphere. In the
time of the coronavirus outbreak in China at the beginning of 2020, one such public
sphere was promoted by former critical journalists who drew on journalistic habitus and
actively engaged in contesting information cover-up, fighting against censorship, and chal-
lenging state discourses. I will now discuss the habitus of this group of people in order to
examine the sub-public sphere promoted by them during the coronavirus outbreak.

The Former Critical Journalists and their Journalistic Habitus

Chinese journalists are arguably the most active bloggers and micro-bloggers among
Chinese internet users. In earlier years, it was common for journalists to adopt their per-
sonal blogs to break news stories and force mainstream media to set relevant agendas
for public debate (Yu 2011). Journalists have also exploited the blogosphere for providing
alternative journalism that provokes critical thinking of the public, as well as pundit commen-
taries and mockeries (Yu 2011). The popularity of social media further inspires Chinese
journalists to explore a spin-off journalistic sphere online by providing personal news
resources, expressing individual opinions around news, and bringing backstage stories
of news production to the public (Fu and Lee 2016). It is fruitful to consider social media
as an extended journalistic sphere that crosses the boundaries between the public space
and journalists’ personal space. In this sphere, journalists’ identities as journalists and citi-
zens, and sometimes activists are blurred (Fu and Lee 2016; Tong 2015b). The holistic
experience online across boundaries helps journalists make sense of their journalistic
lives and ideology (Chu 2012). Chinese journalists establish sub-journalist communities
on social media, in which they interact with each other about resources for investigative
reports and opinions of social injustice, share journalistic ideals and struggles, and show
solidarity in the pursuit of a common identity and resistance (Svensson 2012). They also fre-
quently network with other social groups including scholars, lawyers, and civil society
organisations, establishing communities of like-minded people who pursue various
aspects of reforms and changes in China (Svensson 2012).
The concept of networked habitus is useful in exploring the holistic experience of Chinese journalists on social media (Barnard 2018). Concerned with structure and agency, Bourdieu’s field theory conceptualises habitus of individuals to understand the everyday practice of agents in the field. Habitus is “personal dispositions toward sensing, perceiving, thinking, acting, according to models interiorized in the course of different processes of socialization.” (Bourdieu, as quoted in Benson 1999, 467) Habitus therefore structures our tastes, senses, and actions in a built-in and subconscious way. The interaction between habitus and capital (e.g. skills, social resources of individuals), following specific rules of the field, realises particular types of practice, as illustrated by the formula provided by Bourdieu (2010, 95):

\[ (\text{habitus})(\text{capital}) + \text{field} = \text{practice} \]

In the field of journalism, habitus traditionally enables the practices of a news game that involves a sense of newsworthiness that may have been taken-for-granted, which has been described as journalistic gut feeling (Schultz 2007). Journalistic gut feeling is a form of cultural capital, which can be understood through Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of doxa, that is, “a system of presuppositions inherent in membership in a field” (Bourdieu 2005, 37). In the age of social media, journalists develop a networked habitus, which is forged by daily information distribution and interaction with other citizens online (Barnard 2018). During major social events, the network habitus of journalists is often shared with citizen journalists and activists through practices of social media posting, reposting, commenting, linking, and tagging for the purpose of information dissemination (Goode 2009).

The journalistic field and habitus are shaped by the history of what members of the group have lived and thus differ significantly in context. The group of former critical journalists studied by this paper inherited distinct habitus that was shaped by the history of Chinese critical journalism. At the same time, their departure from the profession enabled them to further blend into citizen journalist and activist roles when practising online contestations.

Chinese critical journalism emerged in the process of media marketisation which began in the 1980s and forced media outlets to directly make profits from the market rather than relying on government subsidies, despite the requirement for the media to continue to promote the Party’s agenda and ideology (Qian and David 2010). In the midst of media searching for new genres of journalism that could attract advertisers and readers, the mid-1990s in China saw the surge of social conflicts caused by economic reform. Unemployment, social inequality and corruption surfaced acutely and caused disillusionment with Communist ideology in the Chinese society (Cai 2010). Critical journalism emerged in this context, meeting both the needs of the CCP who intended to use critical journalism to help strengthen the party ideology and re-establish its legitimacy and of the public who longed for investigation of commercial and political wrongdoings (Tong 2011). The years between mid-1990s and 2003 have been referred to by Chinese media professionals as the golden age of Chinese journalism (Li 2016), in which many influential investigative reports were conducted to reveal economic and political misconduct which powerfully connected to audiences’ experience of social injustice (Tong 2011; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011).

However, critical journalism in the twenty-first century became too autonomous in the Party’s view. The power of holding authorities accountable enabled critical media to
call policy making of the central government into question (Tong 2011). The dark side of Chinese society revealed by critical journalism was sometimes too overwhelming that it pushed the Party’s tolerance to breaking point. Under tightened control, critical journalism declined after 2003, the year critical journalism forced the central government to uncover the outbreak of SARS3 (Tong 2011). The increased pressure from the state and the market after 2003 required critical journalists to develop to a high level of sensitivity in the dynamic political climate, creative skills for bypassing censorship, and be committed to constant self-censorship in the carrying out of reporting.

Chinese critical journalists4 therefore demonstrated the journalistic habitus of pushing the boundaries of permissible coverage (e.g. publishing investigative reports that involve sensitive power relations) and at times moving beyond the boundaries of the acceptable (e.g. publicly criticising the CCP or expressing outright resistance of news censorship) (Hassid 2011; 2015). More specifically, their journalistic habitus was demonstrated by their knowledge of what was permissible within the political boundaries and skills of manoeuvring deliberately and carefully in producing critical reports so that, on the one hand, they can contest controversial issues to the limit that the state’s censorship permits, and on the other hand, maintain a relatively safe relationship with authorities. They often used phrases such as “touching the ceiling,” “cutting the corner,” or “hitting the red line” to describe their practices of exploiting loopholes in the Party’s censorship instructions, or racing against the censorship process to publish information before a ban was issued by the Party (Chen2020a). The skills and technique have been described as continuous improvisation (Repnikova 2017).

Xi Jinping’s leadership has overseen a tightening of media control through a variety of means, including institutional restructuring that ensures more direct and tighter control of the media (Bandurski 2018) and various policies that effectively tamed the practice of investigative journalism (Tong 2019). In many journalists’ view, the crackdown of a number of significant critical news outlets and influential critical journalists between 2014 and 2016 marked the end of critical journalism in China.5 In addition, Party organs have been strengthened by the revival of government subsidy since 2013 (Guo and Hu 2016), in view of the economic and technological challenges faced by traditional media in the twenty-first century. Commercial media face difficulty in competing with Party organs and hence the shrinking of space for critical journalism.6 A large number of critical journalists left the field between 2012 and 2016. A study conducted in 2016–2017 reveals that there were only 175 investigative journalists across traditional and new media in China, a reduction of 58% of the number in 2010-2011(Zhang and Cao 2017).

The case study demonstrated in the next section shows that a group of former critical journalists, who then worked in the fields of e-commerce, non-journalistic e-publishing, and law, drew on their political knowledge and re-adopted their skills of challenging censorship during their online contestations around the coronavirus outbreak. Their journalistic habitus enabled them to promote a sub-public sphere at the beginning of 2020.

Old Habits Die Hard: Former Critical Journalists during the Coronavirus Outbreak in China

This section contextually examines 15 former critical journalists’ WeChat moments over the course of five months, beginning at the time the authorities publicly
acknowledged the outbreak of coronavirus in Wuhan in January 2020. The five months saw the spread of the disease across the country with the Chinese government taking drastic measures to eventually bring the domestic outbreak under control. For the purposes of protecting research participants, all names presented in the following sections are pseudonyms.

Contesting Information Cover-up during the Coronavirus Outbreak

Wuhan Municipal Health Commission announced on December 31 the identification of 27 cases of viral pneumonia in Wuhan. The announcement emphasised that there was no evidence of human-to-human transmission and that the pneumonia was preventable and controllable (ke fang ke kong) (Xinhua, December 31, 2019). It was not until January 20 that the state media publicly acknowledged evidence of human-to-human transmission of the viral pneumonia (BBC Chinese, February 5, 2020), but suspicions around the transmissibility of the virus circulated among this group of former critical journalists before that.

“Something is going on. Is it really ke fang ke kong?” Li Nan posted, sharing Wuhan police’s statements about dealing with individuals spreading “rumours” online in January 9. Li was one of the most influential editorial authors of a metropolitan newspaper which was most well-known for its critical editorials. Having left the newspaper six years ago, he is currently a commentator for a news website, focusing on “apolitical social topics that do not question authority power”.7 Li sensed a wave of information control taking place, and his frequent visits to overseas media further confirmed his concern.8 On January 15, Li posted news from Hong Kong media that the World Health Organisation noted that there might have been limited human-to-human transmission of the coronavirus in Wuhan. On January 16, Li posted, “[Coronavirus] has already spread to Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand and Japan, but there are no reported cases beyond Wuhan domestically …” “Too late!” Li posted when the announcement about the high transmissibility of coronavirus was made on January 20, sharing the news article published on Wuhan’s local newspaper on January 19 entitled “More than 40,000 people gathered in Wuhan Baibuting community for a New Year banquet.”

The ability to suspect is arguably one of the core capitals of critical journalists, that is, the cultural capital of an acute sense of unusual political activities taking place behind the scenes. This sensitivity enables them to question the authorities at the earliest possible time and carry out investigation. It is demonstrated by their journalistic habitus of detecting the patterns and movements of frontstage political communication (normally delivered by state media) that are symptomatic of political tension backstage (Goffman 1990). Whilst the operation of the Chinese propaganda system and information control remains highly secret and sacred for ordinary Chinese people, it is no mystery for critical journalists who, on a day-to-day basis, carefully interpret censorship instructions and try to exploit loopholes to work within the system. For the former critical journalists in this case, being knowledgeable about how information control and the propaganda machinery work in China is based on their experience of interacting with the fields of governance, propaganda, and political communications in China. Their contestations around information control during the Two Sessions9 (Lianghui) most straightforwardly demonstrated this.

Wuhan city government hosted Lianghui from January 7 to January 10, and the Lianghui of Hubei Province took place between January 11 and January 17. During these 12
days, there were no reported new coronavirus cases found in Wuhan (case numbers remained at 41) (Yicai, February 1, 2020). The number dramatically increased a few days after Lianghui (572 cases reported by January 24) (Yicai, January 26, 2020). Wan Hua, a former journalist and Editor-in-Chief for a critical magazine posted,

Seven days of Hubei Lianghui, no new cases, no deaths, no critical cases. Looks like the virus is like a ghost, scared of officials (referring to the Chinese phrase “gui pa guan” (ghosts are afraid of officials)). I suggest Hubei government host another Lianghui to halt the spread of the virus. (Wan Hua, January 26 2020)

Chinese journalists know well that maintaining stability is the priority of government regulation during the Lianghui period every year, with no major negative news coverage permitted. A similar political logic also applied to media reports of the celebration of Chinese New Year, which followed soon after. The former critical journalists on WeChat ridiculed pages of state media China Daily's coverage of Xi Jinping attending diplomatic activities and paying New Year visits to retired Party cadres on the eve of Chinese New Year, as well as the image of the glossy presentation of CCTV Chinese New Year gala, criticising that such celebrations intended to whitewash what was quickly becoming a crisis in China. Behind these posts was their observation that it was the downplaying of case numbers, the severity and scale of the transmissibility of the virus by the authorities in the early stages that squandered a crucial time window to control the virus. Perhaps one step further than their previous exercise of critical journalism was that these former journalists endeavoured to use various means to keep deleted messages alive for as long as possible, a practice that is common in the field of activism. They repeatedly posted messages that had been deleted, particularly those questioning the official numbers of cases and death counts. They highlighted the starkly contrasted numbers of cases in China estimated by overseas scientists, endeavouring to expose “the authorities’ number game,” as explained by Xu Yong, who previously worked for Caixin, one of the most outspoken news magazines in China.

Outspoken media like Caixin are no longer able to say much in Xi’s time. I try not to say much of this kind of things on social media, because my company would not like it. But I cannot stand it sometimes. You know how they are manipulating people’s minds and you just want to let other people know.

Being resourceful and connected to various social groups is another essential capital of critical journalists. The former critical journalists intensely posted about the shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) and clinical staff in hospitals during February and March, when Chinese authorities deleted most information posted by frontline doctors and nurses calling for social donation of masks and PPE to prevent the authorities being cast in a negative light and to maintain the image of a confident government combating the coronavirus (New York Times, December 19, 2020). Drawing on their personal contacts in the medical field, the former journalists exposed devastating details of doctors being affected in ICUs and a serious shortage of hospital beds, as well as doctors and nurses being commanded by the authorities to delete social media posts on the shortage of medical resources. One post on Li Nan’s WeChat moment was widely shared on Weibo, which demonstrated a story of a nurse being requested by the hospital she worked for to write a self-criticism report after exposing the hospital’s desperate need for PPE. In the post, Li showed that the nurse had to apologise for “causing inconvenience to the
hospital and lacking overall awareness of the situation.” Somewhat sharing habitus of citizen journalists, the former journalists also frequently posted relevant information to promote social donations to Wuhan hospitals. Lin Dan, previously an influential journalist and editor published many articles on a WeChat Official Account to criticise the operation of Wuhan hospitals during the crisis. The account attracted many visits by his former peers of investigative journalism who commented and circulated the articles, forming a quasi-platform for citizen journalism.

Information cover-up and censorship during the coronavirus outbreak triggered many former critical journalists to recall their experience during the SARS outbreak 17 years previously, particularly how their investigative reports of the SARS outbreak were censored. Ironically, as they have left the field of journalism and stepped outside “the system” (referring to the media system controlled by the state), they became somewhat more courageous to expose relevant details that they were not able to expose before. Liu Bo, the former Editor-in-Chief of a news magazine, shared a profile report he previously published on Jiang Yanyong, a physician who exposed the government’s cover-up of the SARS epidemic in 2003, in which Jiang said “I have experienced numerous political movements for 50 years, I feel deeply that it is easy to lie, so I insist on never telling lies.” Liu Bo posted, “we had hours of conversations with Mr Jiang for this interview, but we had to self-censor and cut more than half of our article when publishing it. In this very difficult time, I pay my respect to Mr Jiang” (January 20). Reposting the article shared by Liu Bo, Yang Ke, another former Editor-in-Chief of a critical magazine commented “New era; we will not be able to see Jiang Yanyong again … SARS did not change China, not at all”; “the situation [for information cover-up] after 17 years has simply got much worse” (January 20). This comment was shared by most of the observed former journalists. Their deep concern that the history of SARS would repeat itself prompted the public to exercise the so-called sousveillance tactics on the internet by “surveilling the surveillers” (Cammaerts 2012, 127).

**Fighting against Online Censorship**

“He is not a competent emperor. If you really need to have an emperor, change this one.” The former Editor-in-Chief of a critical magazine Wan Hua posted the above message along with screenshots of a then popular historical TV drama in which the emperor in power was being challenged. Wan Hua was commenting on the incident of the journalist Zhang Ouya calling for the resignation of the leader of Wuhan. On January 24, Zhang Ouya posted on his personal Weibo account a call for the replacement of the leader of Wuhan, pointing out that the current leader was incompetent in managing the serious crisis. On the same day, Hubei Daily Press issued an apology to the municipal government, confessing the mistake made by their employee Zhang Ouya on publishing “incorrect speech” on Weibo and hence causing trouble for leaders of various level. The photograph of the apology began to stir the mood of the public online and was quickly deleted.

By posting the narration of the TV drama, Wan was exercising chunqiu bifa, the Chinese tradition of expressing critical opinions against authorities in subtle ways. Circumventing censorship online is a core component of the networked habitus of Chinese journalists. Chinese people online have been creative in using homophones, metaphors and puns to bypass internet censorship and producing satire, jokes, songs, and memes to
ridicule authorities and promote information that is hidden by authorities (Yang 2009; Chen 2020a). Drawing on their day-to-day experience of working with censorship, journalists particularly have been skilful in applying *chunqiu bifa* for poking and mocking the authorities online, and in this way they attract the public to circulate their messages. However, practising *chunqiu bifa* has become increasingly risky since the further tightening up of social media censorship in 2013 (Yang 2014b). In August 2019, Wan Hua posted a phrase on Weibo, which was considered to be mocking a former top leader of the CCP. His Weibo account and WeChat Official Account, which at the time were critical for his business in providing analysis and advice to people with relationship issues at home and work, were shut down. Wan became unemployed. “It is no longer possible to be clever on social media and post words with double meanings. Now you never know where the boundary of online speech is,” lamented Wan Hua in my interview. Yet, during the coronavirus outbreak, Wan Hua decided to take the unknown risk again when contesting the topic of coronavirus outbreak. He joked in a post,

… stupid humans! If eating bats (*bian fu* in Chinese) can bring good luck (*fu* in Chinese), then do you have to cook and eat someone with the surname Xi to make your kids study (*xue xi* in Chinese) well? (Wan Hua, January 23 2020)

When reposting a tragic story on coronavirus deaths, he quipped, “personally commanding, personally instructing” (*qinzi zhihu, qinzi bushu*). This phrase was used by Xi Jinping and state media following criticism that Xi had been notably absent from public view for a number of weeks in January. The phrase was then adopted by Chinese citizens online for political satire, but was quickly censored.

On the night of February 6, joining the mass protest online over the death of the ophthalmologist Doctor Li Wenliang, who was considered one of the first people to raise the alarm about the disease and subsequently was rebuked by the police, the former critical journalists endeavoured to reveal details of the unfair treatment Doctor Li received for being an outspoken citizen. Many of them posted a photograph of the admonishment notice issued by the police to Li Wenliang on January 3, and dubbed “Pay respect to the eight ‘rumourmongers’!” The admonishment notice read (*China Digital Times*, February 6, 2020),

In accordance with the law, we now warn and admonish you for the unlawful matter of publishing untrue discourse on the internet. Your behaviour has severely disrupted social order. Your behaviour has exceeded the scope permitted by law, and has violated the relevant provisions of the Law of the People’s Republic of China on Penalties for Administration of Public Security — it is an illegal act.

The public security bureau hopes that you will actively cooperate with our work, follow the advice of the police, and stop the illegal behaviour. Can you do this?

**Answer:** I can [Li’s answer]

We hope that you can calm down and earnestly reflect, and solemnly warn you: If you are stubborn, refuse to repent, and continue to carry out illegal activities, you will be punished by the law. Do you understand?

**Answer:** Understood [Li’s answer]

The former journalists actively promoted an article entitled “Those people who spoke the truth 34 years ago, how are they?” (referencing the Chernobyl disaster in the Soviet Union in 1986). In addition, they tried to verify the contradictory information
circulated online about the time of death of Li Wenliang. At 9:30 pm on the February 6, state media People’s Daily on Twitter announced that Doctor Li Wenliang had passed away. Three hours later, Wuhan Central Hospital, the hospital where Li was treated, announced on Weibo that they were trying to save the life of Doctor Li Wenliang. At almost the same time, a doctor posted on his personal Weibo account “Doctor Li Wenliang has died.” Sensing that hospital leaders considered Li’s death a sensitive political incident at this point, the former journalists quickly forwarded leaked information showing that doctors treating Li Wenliang were receiving instructions from their superiors to continue to “save” him whilst waiting for further instruction on how to announce Li’s death.

Pretending to save him after he’s passed away? How dare you do this to a dead body? (Qiu Han, February 7 2020)

Who are the other seven “rumourmongers”? How are they? How long do you still want to hide about this? (referencing the punishment of 8 people by the Wuhan Public Security Bureau at the beginning of January) (Yang Ke, February 7 2020).

The outpouring of grief online was not permitted for much longer. Leaked documents showed that Chinese censors sent out directives to local officials, instructing them to “pay particular attention to posts with pictures of candles, people wearing masks, an entirely black image or other efforts to escalate or hype the incident,” as well as to shut down a large number of online memorials initiated by citizens (New York Times, December 19, 2020).

A month later, the former journalists became committed to promoting an article published by the Chinese magazine Profile (renwu), which featured an interview with Doctor Ai Fen, who criticised hospital authorities for suppressing early warnings of the outbreak. As Ai explained in the interview, on December 30, she saw the lab test results of one flu-like case that contained the word “SARS coronavirus.” She circled the word, took a photo and sent it to a medick fellow, a doctor at another hospital. The photo was then circulated in several medical circles in Wuhan. It is now clear that the evidence of SARS-like virus shared by Li Wenliang with his friends was this photo taken by Ai Fen. Ai was soon instructed by the hospital that information about this unknown disease should not be arbitrarily released so as to avoid causing panic. Ai was soon reprimanded by the head of the hospital’s disciplinary inspection committee for “spreading rumours” and “harming stability.” Ai told Profile that “I am not a whistleblower, I am the one who handed out the whistles,” and that “If I had known what was about to happen, I would not have cared about being reprimanded. I would have fucking talked about it to whoever, wherever I could” (The Guardian, March 11, 2020).

The article was quickly deleted online, but Chinese citizens invented 52 different versions of the article online as a way of ridiculing censorship, from one version that arranged characters in the reversed order, to one that was written partially with emojis, and English, Korean, Japanese, pinyin (the romanisation system for Mandarin) versions, as well as one written in morse code. The former journalists celebrated citizens’ creations, gathering different versions and joining the relay of posting them. Within one day, Yang Ke posted 28 different versions of the article, together with quotes from Weibo posts that read “Is it worth it? Only an interview, but deleting it made it into a bible.” “What kind of law did Doctor Ai Fen violate? Are you a person or a team? How can you be so confident in ignoring netizens’ fury?”
Brave critical journalists in China have, at certain times, demonstrated traits of activists, particularly determination to risk unemployment or imprisonment in order to initiate public contestation against authority powers (Stern and Hassid 2012). Despite the self-detachment of journalists from the identity of activists (Tong 2015b), the shared networked habitus between the fields of journalism, citizen journalism and activism makes the transition for journalists to the other two fields relatively smooth. The former journalists, who had left “the system,” somewhat became more willing to employ their political knowledge and writing skills to mobilise sentiments of the public for resistance, promoting what Cammaerts (2012) calls mediation opportunity structure for activism. Chinese people on social media were inspired to individually frame political messages, express grief, and bear witness, participating in connective action for activism (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). The elitist core of contestations, driven by these former journalists, was then expanded to mass participation, forming a meaningful sub-public sphere.

Challenging State Discourses

The former critical journalists were knowledgeable of the holistic approach taken by the Chinese state for promoting a strong nation image both domestically and internationally. As China started gaining control of the spread of Covid-19, state media made intensifying propaganda efforts to shape a particular narrative that highlights three arguments: (1) The Covid-19 pandemic in other countries is out of control and China is winning (NetEase News, April 8, 2020); (2) China was wrongly considered to be the origin of Covid-19 but novel coronavirus cases were found in other countries before the outbreak in China (The Guardian, November 29, 2020); (3) China has provided a success model of taming the disease and China is the world’s saviour that provides medical supplies and doctors to many other countries combating the virus (The Economist, April 16, 2020).

Since January, the former journalists have frequently posted to ridicule the claims made by state media, including People’s Daily and Xinhua News, that certain Chinese medicines can cure coronavirus. On March 4, many former journalists mocked the news title published on Xinhuanet.com, “We are confident. The world should thank China.” The article highlighted that China provided America generous assistance by offering medical supplies, despite America unfairly claiming that China was the origin of the virus and criticised human rights issues around the lockdown of Wuhan (Xinhua March 4, 2020). During early March, Chinese state media portrayed Italy as being in a devastating state as it was not able to follow China’s successful model of controlling the virus. Many former journalists posted diary entries published by Chinese people living in Italy to reveal a different picture that showed that social order and humanity remained during the crisis in Italy. On March 16, People’s Daily published the title on their WeChat Official Account “87,182 cases outside of China, overtake! (fan chao)” (China Digital Times, March 17, 2020). The Chinese word “fan chao” is usually used when commentating on sport contests, particularly in describing the situation that a fallen-behind team overturns its position to become the winner. The use of the word “fan chao” together with an exclamation mark, alongside a colourful graph showing large numbers of infection cases outside of China, was collectively condemned by the former journalists as being inhuman and inappropriate.

On April 4, the Washington Post published an investigative report entitled “The U.S. was beset by denial and dysfunction as the coronavirus raged” (Washington Post, April 4,
2020). This article was then translated by Chinese state media with a new title of “This is how the US squandered the critical 70 days for fighting the virus” and widely circulated by Chinese citizens on social media, mocking President Trump’s incompetence and the political failure of mitigating the pandemic in the US. The former journalist Li Nan on April 15 posted screenshots of internal WeChat discussions that showed the Chinese Central Propaganda Department giving instructions to media in Hong Kong and Macao requiring them all to repost the article.

In April, the former critical journalists collectively demonstrated support for writer Fang Fang, who was widely condemned by state media and citizens online because her popular diary documenting her life during Wuhan’s lockdown period was translated into English and published by an American publisher. Fang Fang’s diary, updated on a daily basis on Weibo, documented challenges of lockdown life in real time, sad stories of ordinary people’s life and death, and issues of social injustice and the abuse of power demonstrated during the early days of the coronavirus outbreak. The state media Global Times, in an editorial, demonstrated a Chinese professor’s criticism that the diary ‘serves as a weapon for the West to deny all the efforts and support offered by the Chinese people to Wuhan and to the world, and will probably be used by the West as a piece of third-party “evidence” to claim compensation from China one day’ (Global Times, April 8, 2020). The Editor-in-Chief of Global Times went on Weibo to criticise Fang Fang for breaking the public’s heart as they now would have to face the attack of China by the West because of what Fang Fang published in her diary. The former journalists reposted many of Fang Fang’s diary entries on WeChat, praising her bravery to speak the truth during lockdown, and criticising state media for deliberately weaponising a writer’s work and patronising the public’s understanding of international politics.

As one former journalist explains, “see the stupidity of people online! I just wanted to let people know how they [the state] are manipulating public opinion”.18 This sense of responsibility to enlighten and educate the public has been commonly shared in the journalist community, who inherit the Confucian tradition of journalists acting the role of public intellectuals (Lee 2005). It has been criticised that Chinese journalists’ idea of enlightening the public does not carry with it the ambition for promoting democracy and citizen rights (Tong 2015b), but in the case of challenging state discourses during the coronavirus outbreak, the exposure of the power and manipulation of state discourses by the former journalists promoted the formation of a critical public.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper explores a contingent sub-public sphere promoted by a group of former critical journalists during the coronavirus outbreak at the beginning of 2020. Readopting the concept of the public sphere in the Chinese context, I argue that there have emerged contingent elite-driven public spheres during particular events, which effectively engage mass participation of Chinese people. I argue for the importance of studying the episodic formation of the public sphere in China through investigating the nuances of contestations of social members in particular events. To understand the contesting activities of the former critical journalists during the coronavirus outbreak, I explore concepts of habitus and capital from Bourdieus field theory as analytical tools to complement the study of the Chinese public sphere.
The former critical journalists studied in this paper, who were actively engaged with investigating, exposing, and criticising the wrongdoings of officials and controversial issues of governance (often on local levels) in their previous careers, preserved distinct journalistic habitus after leaving the field. Their journalistic habitus was shaped by the history they have lived, which was contained within memory and experience. The journalistic habitus and cultural capitals, demonstrated through their knowledge of Chinese politics, censorship, skills of public communication and circumventing censorship, and recourse of social networks, continued to promote their engagement of criticising the authorities on social media during the coronavirus outbreak. Their suspicions and concerns about the frequent police warnings at the beginning of the outbreak and the authorities' downplaying of the spread of the disease showed the acute sensitivity around information cover-up in crisis events, particularly on the construction of particular media discourses and how sectors of the police, the government and the media work together to promote certain narratives. They exercised sousveillance and resistance during the crisis, challenging state discourse around the crisis by exposing propaganda techniques adopted by state media. They collectively criticised the tightened media control under Xi's leadership that had contributed to the taming of critical journalism and hence the inability of critical journalists to effectively investigate and inform the public about the virus outbreak. Perhaps being nostalgia, their sometimes sentimental posting powerfully invoked the emotive engagement of the public that is essential for the formation of the public sphere in China at the current time.

It should be noted that contingent formation of the public sphere in China is often short-lived. As of the time of writing, the majority of posts analysed in this paper were no longer visible by the former journalists’ networks.\(^{19}\) The intense contestation in the first few months of 2020 left little lasting trace. Yet, this paper argues that the elite-driven and short-lived public sphere demonstrates the agency of Chinese people who effectively contributed to the long-term social mobilisation of a large scale that is crucial for the formation of a critical public.

The elitist public sphere promoted by the former critical journalists during the coronavirus outbreak should be considered as emblematic of the ongoing transformation of Chinese society.

NOTES

1. WeChat, known as “\(\text{wei xin}\)” in Chinese, is a mobile text and voice messaging communication platform developed by Tencent in China. WeChat moments is a key function of the app that enables users to share text, photographs and videos to their networks.

2. I conducted in-depth interviews with all 15 observed former critical journalists during September and October 2019 on the topic of career transition, and then with some of them in July 2021 about their social media posting during the coronavirus outbreak.

3. Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) is the viral respiratory disease which broke out in China at the end of 2002 and caused more than 8,000 cases including close to 800 deaths by July 2003, according to the WHO.

5. Li Nan, Lin Dan, Wan Hua, Yang Ke, Xu Yong. Interviews by author. September 2019. This research anonymises identities of all interviewees. All names of interviewees are pseudonyms.


9. Two Sessions refers to China’s annual plenary sessions, where members of the two main political bodies of China - the National People’s Congress (NPC) and the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) meet to reveal plans for China’s policies in areas of economy, military, trade, diplomacy, environment and others (SCMP 2020). At a similar time each year, meetings involving members of the local People’s Congress and the local committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference are also hosted.

10. The authorities, after the zero increase was questioned later by journalists, attributed figure to a lack of testing kits (Yicai, February 1, 2020).


14. Jiang Yanyong has been held under house arrest after he wrote to the top leadership asking for a reassessment of the 1989 Tiananmen Square pro-democracy movement in April 2019 (Yu 2020).

15. WeChat Official Accounts is a function of WeChat which enables businesses or individuals to create and push feeds to subscribers.


17. Li sent out a warning about the emergence of cases of a SARS-like virus on December 30 in his personal WeChat group of fellow medicks. He was then rebuked and silenced by the police (Beijing Youth, cited by China Digital Times, January 7, 2020). On January 1, 2020, the Wuhan Public Security Bureau published a message on their official Weibo account announcing that eight people who were disseminating false information about pneumonia cases had created adverse social impact and had been dealt with according to the law, warning the public that the internet was not outside the law (Chinanews, January 1, 2020). On January 2, China’s state broadcaster CCTV reported on the dealing of eight “rumourmongers” by Wuhan Public Security Bureau, sending out a public warning to all viewers and web-users. After being rebuked, Li Wenliang continued to work on the frontline treating coronavirus patients and he later contracted the disease. On January 27, Beijing Youth published an interview with Li, entitled “The admonished Wuhan doctor: 11 days later, he enters quarantine after contracting the disease from a patient.” The article was quickly circulated online but soon banned.


19. Most of the former critical journalists mentioned in this paper set their WeChat moments posts to automatically expire after three days, providing a measure of self-protection.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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