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Mapping Political Views in Chinese Cyberspace

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Abstract

Existing research on online public opinion in China has focused on how Internet empowers and helps netizens to politically express themselves or how the state controls their opinions, but few have examined the general ideological landscape and its underlying structures. This study attempts to outline ten clusters of political views popular in Chinese cyberspace, finding that Chinese online ideologies have a "left" and "right" cleavage and these clusters group along three dimensions in terms of their different views on political development, economic reform and nationalism. We argue that this left-right division does not suggest a pro- and anti-government cleavage and provide an analysis of factors that may contribute to the plurality of ideologies in Chinese Internet.

Keywords: *ideology, cyberpolitics, public opinion, authoritarianism, China*

1. Introduction

Ideology plays a crucial role in the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) endeavour to garner legitimacy. Since President Xi Jinping came to office, the party has taken great effort to unify ideology among party members and the general public. Through the quest for the "China Dream", the CCP shows its determination to achieve broad social consensus on the country's path to the future.

Yet Chinese citizen's ideologies are far from unified. In Chinese cyberspace, there have been heatedly debated on various issues. For instance, should the state intervene in housing prices, should the government limit or encourage the development of state-owned enterprises, is Western multi-party politics suitable for China, or are national sovereignty and territorial integrity superior to all other values? These discussions are reflections of divergent ideological positions in the society.

Previous studies of online public opinion in China either emphasize how Internet empowers netizens and helps them to voice their opinions (e.g. Yang, 2009), or focus on how their views have been controlled or manipulated by the state (e.g. King *et al.*, 2014, 2017). Few studies have examined the details of these opinions and views, and how they are different when in comparison with each other. Although there are some researches probing into individual netizen clusters with common political views, such as Voluntary Fifty-cent Army or Little Pinks (Fang and Repnikova, 2018; Han, 2015), the general configuration and underlying structures of all the clusters remain unexplored.

It is the purpose of this article to present the general landscape of ideological diversity in Chinese cyberspace and explore the underlying structures. We find that a variety of ideologies actively debate on the Internet and have formed the camps of "left" and "right". No matter they are left or right, these ideologies tend to group along three dimensions

according to their different views on political development, economic reform and nationalism. We argue that the division between the left and the right does not indicate a pro- and anti-government cleavage. For the left-wing ideologies, their positive views about authoritarian regime and nationalism are well aligned with the party-state, but it is not the case for their demands for socioeconomic equality. For the right-wing ideologies, although their pro-democracy and pro-Western orientations do not get along with the authorities, the government would not necessarily object market reform or economic globalisation advocated by the rightists. These findings suggest that a consolidated opposition to the regime may not emerge in the near future.

Our findings also shed light on how political cleavages emerge. The diversified ideologies in the Chinese Internet are a product of increasing heterogeneity of Chinese society. Rising middle class and private entrepreneurs have brought about new political preferences in the public sphere. Winners and losers during the market reform have developed divergent attitudes towards reform policies. Globalisation and the rise of the Internet economy have also contributed to the plurality of ideologies. China's vibrant pop culture and fan culture have facilitated netizens in the organisation and mobilisation of their political expressions in online debates.

The empirical analysis of this study is based on existing literature and the authors' observation on the discussions and debates in Chinese cyberspace. The focus of the analysis is identifying the "labels" of distinct political views or ideologies, and examining their major propositions. The labels are tagged by netizens onto different clusters of opinion, for instance, "Mao Fans" or "US-cent Party". While the different clusters may overlap in certain aspects, such as support towards their government, they do differ in the main thrust of their stance.

This article is organised as follow. We first discuss ideological dimensions and the "left" and "right" in Chinese Internet, and provide a working definition of labelled ideological cluster. Then we go through the individual ideological clusters, presenting their major arguments and government's attitudes towards them. Followed there is an analysis of factors contributing to the plurality of ideologies in Internet. Finally, we conclude that these ideological clusters do not suggest a pro- and anti-government cleavage, and whether the CCP can unify the diversified ideologies needs further observation.

2. Left, Right and Ideological Labels in Chinese Cyberspace

Scholars on ideologies have found that individuals tend to position their views on one or more dimensions of political spectrum, such as "left-right" or "liberal-conservative" (Campbell *et al.*, 1980). These positions show that people are pursuing "consistency" in their ideas across various issues. For instance, individuals who favour market economy are inclined to hold a favourable view of democracy. Likewise, individuals who advocate authoritarianism are more likely to support state intervention. In societies with multiple party competition, different political parties offer different policy packages labelled as "conservative" or "left". By choosing among different packages, citizens are pushed to position themselves on one or more ideological dimensions.

Conventional wisdom believes that in authoritarian regimes citizens tend not to group along a certain political spectrum because of ideological control and lack of electoral competition.[1] However, scholars have found this may not be true in China after the country started its economic reform. Chinese society has become increasingly diverse and

different social actors have formed divergent political views. In Chinese cyberspace, clusters of Internet users with different political ideas are frequently labelled as "New Left", "Liberals" or others, showing that netizens are aware that there are certain political spectrums in form. Therefore, in contemporary Chinese society, different ideologies are likely to have been structured along certain dimensions.

Some China observers argued that ideology in China could be simply explained by one-dimension with "pro-government" on the one end and "pro-Western" on the other (Mulvad, 2018). Others, however, find that there may be two dimensions underlying Chinese citizens' political views – an economically left-right and politically authoritarian-democratic axis, or a capitalism-socialism and paternalism-fraternalism axis (Mulvad, 2018; Shi-Kupfer *et al.*, 2017; Wu and Meng, 2017). Pan and Xu's study on China's online ideologies finds that public preferences currently showed three dimensions: (1) a political dimension differentiating authoritarian conservatives from democratic liberals; (2) an economic/social dimension distinguishing economically pro-market and socially non-traditional individuals from those in favour of state intervention and traditional values; (3) the nationalism dimension dividing respondents between nationalists and those with a globalised view (Pan and Xu, 2017: 254-272).

These three dimensions, though statistically distinctive, are highly correlated. That is, those who favour authoritarian systems in politics are inclined to support state intervention in economy and hold sceptical attitudes towards the West; individuals who show preference for Western democratic systems are more likely to approve free market economy and tend to be more open-minded to the Western world. According to the tradition in Chinese public debates, the former group of people, we may label them as "left"; for the latter group, we can label them as "right". In this sense, the left-right dichotomy may represent one

of the most profound divides in Chinese society. However, this left-right division should not be simplified into a pro- or anti-government cleavage. As we will see in the next section, the ideological clusters on the "left" are not necessarily well aligned with the regime, while the rightist clusters do not necessarily go against the government.

Chinese netizens with different political ideas are now active on the Internet, which have formed multiple clusters in recent years. During online debates, the netizens tend to give their opponents demeaning nicknames. For instance, the Little Pinks were labelled by their rivals, and they retaliated with nicknames like "US-cent Party" (Fang and Repnikova, 2018). When these names become more widely used, they eventually turn into the "labels" representing the different political views and ideologies. In this article, we define an ideological cluster as a labelled opinion group with common political stance and propositions. Based on our online observation, we identify ten major ideological clusters currently active in Chinese cyberspace, namely, Voluntary Fifty-cent Army, the Industrial Party, Mao Fans, New Left, Young Marxists, the Little Pinks and Imperial Han at the left side of political spectrums, and Liberals, Neo-liberals and US-cent Party at the right side.

The identification is based on two standards: first, the label of the cluster must be widely used online for over one year; second, the cluster of opinions should generally share the same "organisation of preference across a variety of different issues" (Pan and Xu, 2017: 257).[2] For instance, the Little Pinks would hold relatively consistent nationalist attitudes towards South China Sea disputes or South Korea's deployment of American anti-missile defence system; Neo-liberals would consistently have non-interventionist views on stock market governance or reform of the state-owned enterprises.

However, due to the fluid nature of online discussions, the clusters do not have clear-cut membership. It is possible that an individual

belongs to one ideological cluster when debating on one issue but another cluster on another issue. For example, one netizen may be labelled as "Voluntary Fifty-cent Army" when he or she defends the government in domestic issues, while labelled as the "Little Pinks" when it comes to foreign affairs discussions. On the other hand, the use of the labels in online environment can be rather casual. In their usage, the above two labels can be used interchangeably in labelling all opinions standing up for the government, no matter whether the issue is domestic or foreign-related. Consequently, some of these different clusters may have significant overlaps. It is difficult to draw a clear boundary between each cluster and estimate their membership size, let alone to quantify the relative influence of the clusters in the Chinese Internet. What is clear is that there are more numbers of leftist clusters than those on the right. This may be the product of government censorship and public opinion guidance online.

Each cluster may discuss various issues, involving politics, economy and foreign relations, but each of them generally has its own topics of focus. We will see in the next section that these topics are roughly centred on three lines of issues: attitudes towards the authoritarian regime, the role of the state in economy, and nationalism in foreign issues, which is consistent with the three dimensions revealed in Pan and Xu's research (Pan and Xu, 2017).

3. Ideologies on the Left

There are seven ideological clusters belonging to the "left" camp. In political dimension, the leftist clusters tend to support the authoritarian regime and tend not to favour Western-style democracy. Economically, these clusters see importance in social equality. Some of them pay great attention to people who are underprivileged; others even wish to revert

to the planned economy. In the dimension regarding foreign affairs, they tend to be nationalistic and defensive of the government.

Voluntary Fifty-cent Army（自乾五）

The Voluntary Fifty-cent Army[3] is a group that tends to produce commentaries in favour of the Chinese government and the CCP. Unlike the "Fifty-cent Army" (五毛黨),[4] the Voluntary Fifty-cent Army is not hired by the authorities. They voluntarily defend the CCP's policies online. The term "Voluntary Fifty-cent Army" first appeared sporadically in 2005 and has spread to become the label of a netizen cluster since 2008 (Pan, 2015: 91). The year 2008 witnessed a series of natural calamities and tragedies like the Tibet riots and Sichuan Earthquake and protests against the Olympic torch relay. The Voluntary Fifty-cent Army widely participated in online discussions about these events and became well known to the public. In 2014, this group even attracted state-controlled media's attention and was praised as the "firm advocates of core socialist values" (Zhao, 2014).

As a significant force in cyber expression, the "Voluntary Fifty-cent Army" is active on a number of websites and forums, such as military boards on *newsmth.net* (水木社區) and *tianya.cn* (天涯論壇).[5] They are likely to use diversified tactics, such as labelling wars, face-slapping, cross-talk, fishing, and positive mobilisation to solidify their identity and criticise their opponents (Han, 2015: 1012-1019). However, they are not cyber nationalists who are over-emotional and ignored the facts. Instead, they put more emphasis on rationality and evidence, which distinguish them from other groups which also criticise Western governments and liberal intellectuals. Although they only constitute a small group in China's online ideological space, they can sometime guide and influence public opinion effectively (Han, 2015: 1020-1021).

***The Industrial Party*（工業黨）**

The Industrial Party labels those who laud the industrial, technological and military development, and uphold it as the only way for China to become a strong nation and gain advantage in global competition. Becoming prominent in cyberspace after the 2008 financial crisis (Xin, 2016), this group is made up of avid lovers of military and technology, and China's largest Quora-like site *zhihu.com* is its most important platform for discussion. Opinions of this group are popular among university students majoring in science and engineering or young professionals working in industries related to information and technology. They despise people who talked about ideology, virtue and culture, and disdain their lack of logical, mathematical and scientific knowledge (Wang, 2011).

This group is neither against learning from the West nor critical of the autocratic rule. They would be supportive of the regime as long as it is devoted to industrial development. Many of the opinions demonstrate evident statism orientations, believing a strong and effective state is the guarantee of industrialisation and modernisation. This tendency is announced in their book, *The big goal: Our political consultation with this world*, in which they forthrightly declared that they only acknowledge Chinese history after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. They see this as the starting point of China's development into a new industrial civilization (Ren *et al.*, 2012). Taking on a social Darwinist view, they strongly believe that China would suffer if it is to slow down in industrial development. To prevent this from happening, they advocate export-oriented industrialisation and control of sea routes for shipping.

New Left（新左派）

The New Left echoes Western left-wing thoughts in terms of their concerns over social equality issues and scepticism of capitalism. Compared to other leftists, such views are more popular among people with higher education levels. This group is likely to be influenced by leading intellectuals such as Wang Shaoguang, Wang Hui, Cui Zhiyuan, Hu Angang, Han Yuhai, Pan Wei and so on. Differing from Western leftists, their proposals have a strong sense of statism, viewing a strong and authoritarian state as the precondition for national rejuvenation. In this sense, they are in support of the authoritarian regime and oppose Western democracy.

However, they do not have a unified economic claim. Some of them accept state-controlled market economy and globalisation on the premise that the country becomes more powerful and prosperous. Others believe that social problems in China now are due to the free flow of capital. They hold negative attitudes towards globalisation and consider it as the political tool of Western developed countries. Therefore, they criticise market economy and think that China has changed into a capitalist society. Their rivals in online debates are mostly Neo-liberals. They blame Neo-liberals for rising inequality in the country. With increasingly social problems emerging in the process of market reform, this camp has earned the support of those who accept that unfairness and injustice are brought about by market.

Mao Fans（毛粉）

Mao fans represent the nostalgic sentiments of Mao's era and the wish to return to Maoist past. This camp regards reform and opening-up as the source of economic inequality and social problems like unemployment

and corruption. Therefore, they miss the state-run economy in Mao times when people lived a relatively equal life and had less corruption. They also support authoritarian governance under a strong leadership and favour collective values.

This group may reflect the views of people who grew up in Mao's time or are believers of Maoist ideology (Tian, 2018). Netizens who are tagged with this label are likely to be former employees of state-owned enterprises who experienced laid-off flows in the course of reform, especially those in the late 1990s (Li, 2016). As the social security network was not set up at that time, they were offered one-off compensation without sufficient welfare protection. The experience made them blame the reform policy and show their preference for the Communist economic system during Mao's time. Some of them often participate in economic and political discussions against other ideological clusters. *Red Song Net* (紅歌會網) and *"Support Mao Bar"* (挺毛吧) on *Baidu.com* are their important online forums. However, in the current ideological debates online, Mao fans do not gain wide influence. Although they share common views with the party on specific issues, they are critical of the government's pro-market policies.

Young Marxists（青年馬克思主義者）

In recent years, a group of Young Marxists have emerged in Chinese colleges and universities. They seem to sincerely believe in Marxism and Maoist ideology, and have paid much attention to social equality, labor right, as well as rights of other disadvantaged groups. Many of them set up student clubs or societies to discuss Marxism and social issues. Their activities are generally offline, but recently they have gradually widened their influence on the Internet. An eye-catching incident is that when the young Marxists joined a workers' protest in Shenzhen in mid-2018, which involved Marxists students from elite

universities all over the country. Those protesting students were detained or sent back home (*BBC News*, 10 August 2018). The Marxists societies in many universities were reshuffled, which resulted in a new wave of protests from the students. These students have established websites and twitter accounts outside China to publicize their political ideas. Their posts are full of Maoist discourse, for instance, "to unite the workers and the peasants". They advocate social equality and believe that today's China is full of unfairness. They also took initiative to investigate the conditions of workers on their campus. Some of them joined China's #MeToo Movement and played leading roles.

The rise of Young Marxists is largely a byproduct of the party's endeavors of strengthening ideological education in recent years. At the conference on the national college ideological and political work in 2016, president Xi called on all universities and colleges to give priority to "ideological and political work" throughout the whole process of education (Xi, 2016). Under such circumstances, more and more universities and even some private colleges have established school of Marxism. By the end of 2016, there were over 400 schools of Marxism throughout the country and the number has still been growing until now (Chen, 2017). According to an official report, there were around two million students studying in schools of Marxism in 2017 (Yu *et al.*, 2017).

Furthermore, the party-state has provided more financial support for studies on Marxist ideology, and invested a great deal in compiling a new collection of Marxist classics. Textbooks and other course materials on ideological education have been revised. In 2015, China held the first World Marxism Congress to "discuss the future orientation of the socialist ideology" (*The Economic Times*, 10 October 2015), and over 400 scholars from 20 countries were invited to participate. In May 2018, president Xi delivered a speech at a high-profile conference in

celebration of Marx's 200th birthday. He stressed the importance of Marxist ideologies in China's reform and development, and called on all the party members to "deeply learn and better practice Marxism" (Xi, 2018).

Students have been encouraged to propagate Marxism, as well as CCP's ideologies and policies to their fellow students and local communities. In Beijing, a doctoral student group was established to deliver public lectures on Marxism and the newly-launched Xi's thought in universities, enterprises, government agencies, and local communities. Originally this group was composed of about 150 postgraduate students from universities in Beijing. Now it has expanded to schools in other provinces.

***Little Pinks*（小粉紅）**

The Little Pinks is a prominent group of nationalistic youth that has emerged in Chinese cyberspace in recent years. This group originated from a website for sharing original writings on romantic love. As the background of this website was pink, they were nicknamed "Little Pinks". These literature lovers often discussed politics and gradually migrated to different websites to defend the Chinese government (Fang and Repnikova, 2018). Currently, almost all young and nationalistic netizens in Chinese cyberspace are labelled as "Little Pinks".

The Little Pinks were active in social media sites like *Weibo* (Chinese's largest twitter-like site), and *Emperor Forum* on *Baidu.com*. They would transform into a powerful group when ignited by occasional political events like the South China Sea disputes or South Korea's deployment of American anti-missile defense system. They even skirted the Great Firewall to excoriate anti-Chinese individuals and organisations. One famous event was on 20 January 2016, several days after Tsai Ing-wen was elected as Taiwan's president; they "bombarded"

Tsai's Facebook pages and other pro-independence news media with excessive pro-China messages (Ruan, 2016).

The Little Pinks represent political views of some of the young generations who are born in the 1980s and 1990s. They grew up in the period of China's rapid economic growth and did not experience economic hardship and political volatility. Therefore, unlike their seniors, they are more confident of China's development (*People's Daily Online*, 18 July 2016). Their organisational behaviours and ability have caught Chinese authorities' attention. The Communist Youth League attempted to enlist them as its followers and guide them to defend the government on the Internet (Shan and Chen, 2019). However, the Little Pinks still maintained their fluidity characteristics and have not become subordinated to the government.

Imperial Han（皇漢）

Another nationalist cluster active online in recent years is Imperial Han, or Han Chauvinism. Differing from the Little Pinks who are often mobilised by tensions between China and other countries, the Han Chauvinists are more attracted to historical and cultural issues arisen from the divisions between Han and other ethnic groups in China. They hold the views that Han culture is superior to the cultures of ethnic minorities and other countries and only Han culture represents the "authentic" Chineseness. With regard to Chinese history, the Imperial Hans reject Yuan and Qing as Chinese dynasties. During these two periods China was under the rules of Mongols and Manchu, and official textbooks accept the two as orthodox Chinese dynasties. They argue that the "barbarian" rulership should be responsible for China's falling behind Western countries in modern history because it had destroyed the "best elements" of Chinese civilization.[6] Believers of Imperial Han propositions partake actively in discussions in history- or culture-related

boards in *Baidu Tieba*, *Tianya* or other social media sites. Their rivals in debates are often netizens from Mongol or Manchu groups as well as Han netizens disagreeing on their views. This group is an avid promoter of the *Hanfu* (Han clothing) movement, which encourages people to wear the traditional dress of Han before the Manchu conquest. (Chris and Katrina, 2018)

As they think highly of traditional Han Chinese culture, imperial Han followers appear to be suspicious of Western values. They tend to believe that China's future to a large degree lies in whether the nation could revive its traditional culture, especially Confucian norms and values. Traditional culture provides a valuable source for China's development, and the goal of this development is to reproduce the glory of the past Chinese empires. The Imperial Han's nostalgia of the past is somehow aligned with the Communist Party's effort to revive traditional Chinese culture (*CCP News*, 13 February 2017). This could be why the government generally is tolerant of their online discussions and offline *Hanfu* gatherings. The Imperial Hans are critical of the government's preferential social economic policies in minority-populated areas and the official ideology of ethnic equality. In this sense, this cluster may not always get along with the authorities. The *Hanfu* movement has generated increasing amount of business opportunities. Many fashion and clothing stores on e-commerce platforms specialise in *Hanfu* (Shao, 2017). Market forces, in turn, may have facilitated the rise of *Hanfu* movement and Imperial Han views.

Comparing these leftist clusters, two features are evident. First, although these labels are categorised as "left", the sources of the ideologies are very divergent. The Imperial Han's and the Little Pinks' propositions are founded on nationalism. The New Left have inherited their thoughts from the Western left-wing tradition. The Young Marxists have been inspired by Marxism and Maoism. The variety of leftist views

may be legacies of China's imperial tradition, Communism, and ambitions for modernisation. Second, these leftist opinions are not always well aligned with the government. The Mao Fans hold grievance against market reform, and the Young Marxists are trouble-makers in eyes of the government. But generally, they are sceptical towards Western liberalism and stands with the Chinese government in this aspect.

4. Ideologies on the Right

At the right side of political spectrum, the number of ideological clusters are not as many as the leftist ideologies, which may be due to the party's control of ideology. However, this does not mean that the party-state completely denies them. Among the right-wing ideologies, "Liberals" labels those views mainly on political issues, while "Neo-Liberals" has a topic of focus on social economic development. The "US-cent Party" refers to a positive attitude towards Western values and are sceptical of nationalism in foreign relations.

Liberals（自由派）

Opinions labelled as "Liberals" favour human rights, press freedom and competitive elections. They advocate the introduction of Western-style democracy through expanding political participation and political reform (Xiao, 2003), while criticising the party-state for corruption and power abuse. Due to such values and pursuit, they are an easy target for attacks as "not loving the country" or "betraying the country".

Netizens with liberal opinions are likely to be found in websites related to book reviews and readings, particularly in the Chinese version of Goodreads, *douban.com*. Others are fans of liberal intellectuals such as He Weifang, Zi Zhongyun, Qin Hui, Ren Jiantao and Liu Junning.

After the advent of social media sites, those intellectuals moved to cyberspace and engaged in a series of online debates. Some of them were once very influential and attracted hundreds of thousands of followers on *Weibo.com*. The right-wing magazine *Yanhuang Chunqiu* (炎黄春秋) was also published online and became an important platform for liberal voices. Since Xi took power, the influence of liberals has largely been suppressed. *Yanhuang Chunqiu* was shut down and social media accounts of He Weifang and a few other leading figures were removed. As a result, their voices currently laid dormant in Chinese cyberspace. It became hard to track the magnitude and changes of this group, but it would certainly not vanish in Chinese society.

***Neo-liberals*（新自由派）**

Compared to liberals, the label "Neo-liberals" is more likely to be used in economic issues. Netizens with such a tag share the same beliefs as their Western counterparts, which uphold economic liberalisation, privatisation, marketisation and minimum state interference or regulation (*ChinaFile*, 8 November 2013). They argue that problems in contemporary China such as inequalities and corruption are mainly caused by incomplete market reform as a result of government interference and state-owned systems. Hence, the fundamental way to resolve these problems is to implement marketisation, liberalisation and privatization to their fullest. This ideological cluster has often shown up in debates on economic policies, for instance, the SOE reform, industrial policies, rejuvenation of the North-east "Rusty Belt" provinces, etc.[7] Opinions of this group are likely to be influenced by famous economists, like Zhang Weiying, Wu Jinglian, Mao Yushi, Zhang Wuchang and Zhou Qiren.

The Neo-liberals' propositions could be accepted by the government. In the late 1990s, the Chinese government promoted a

massive wave of state-owned enterprises reform, which to a large degree represents what the Neo-liberals would advocate. At that time a large number of small and middle-sized state enterprises went bankrupt or were privatized and numerous workers were laid-off, leaving space for the rise of private enterprises and market economy in the following decade. Xi's leadership vowed to make state-owned enterprises "larger and stronger", which is not what the Neo-liberals would agree with. However, this does not mean that the party-state completely opposes Neo-liberalism. If Beijing needs private entrepreneurs to help boost the economy during economic slow-down, Neo-liberals may gain more influence in cyberspace.

US-cent Party（美分黨）

US-cent Party are used to label those who favour Western, especially US systems or values, like press freedom, judicial independence, human rights and competitive elections. Their online rivals accused them of "being paid by the US government" or being "traitors", and labelled them as such (Cai, 2018). Netizens tagged as "US-cent Party" may largely overlapped with the liberals. Only this label is more likely to show up when the online debates are involving foreign affairs. The group favours the government's open-door policy but does not share the government's caution against the spread of Western values. They believe that China should learn from the West and not hold a nationalistic stance against the outside world. The party-state is concerned and alert to the US-cent Party, especially when the Sino-US relations go down. Due to their political preferences, they are regarded as ideological antagonists of the party-state and are even characterised as "Paving the Way Party" (帶路黨) which portrays them as paving the way for US intervention. Hence, the party-state has gradually reduced their space for online expression.

While the leftist clusters may be legacies of China's imperial past and Communism, the rightist opinions may be the product of the country's reform and opening-up. The Open Door policy has not only introduced investment and technology into the country, but also ideas from the West. After forty years of market reform, these rightist opinions are still not as diverse as those at the left side of the political spectrum in terms of the number of online clusters. From time to time we can observe divergent ideas among these liberal-oriented netizens. For instance, they had heated discussions on the same-sex marriage issues or the #Metoo movement. However, these divergent ideas have yet to develop into different opinion clusters in the Chinese Internet. The party's ideological control may have prevented those ideas from reaching wider audience and hence nurturing more online opinions. As the party-state further tightens its grip on the Internet, the diversity of the rightist opinions may become even more diminished.

5. Ideological Diversity: Why?

Although seeking to build a unifying ideology is always the CCP's important goal, the party's official ideology is not a unified one, but a mixture of Marxism, Maoism, Deng and other top leaders' legacies, which may have manifested in the plurality of online debates. On the one hand, there is the Maoist legacy which champions central planning, state ownership and equal income distribution, and Deng's endorsement of market economy and increasing inequality. These two conflicting legacies have been intertwining throughout the course of economic reform. On the other hand, the CCP has a strong inclination to nationalism. One major goal of the Chinese Communist Revolution was national greatness and prosperity (Johnson, 1962). After the end of the Cold War, Beijing has resorted to nationalism for popular support and

loyalty (Zhao, 1998). School curricula and propaganda strategies were redesigned to promote patriotism and the party's image as the leader of national rejuvenation. Besides, three factors may have further contributed to the diversity of online ideologies in China.

5.1. Diversified Chinese Society

In the Mao Era when China was embroiled in "class struggle", the country was a largely flat society with not much heterogeneity in terms of class structure. During this time, society was under the control of the state with the pervasiveness of an official ideology. There is little room for autonomy. The situation has gradually changed since the launch of economic reform. With rapid economic development, new social forces have emerged and have grown to form new social relations. In different stages of reform, members from various social classes experienced different economic impacts. In the early stage of the reform, hundreds of millions of Chinese farmers, workers and self-employed individuals benefitted from the reform. By the end of 1980s, with the springing up of the market economy, private enterprises had the opportunity to rise, while the benefits of some workers and most farmers declined. From the end of 1990s, the original interest structure has further diverged. The gap between urban and rural areas, between different industries, between coastal and central-west regions has become more pronounced (Lu, 2010). China even became one of the most unequal countries in the world (Wallace, 2014).

Market reform has created winners and losers who would have divergent attitudes towards reform policies. New social forces such as private entrepreneurs, the middle class, and migrant workers whose voices can no longer be neglected in the public sphere are growing in numbers. Social plurality leads to a variety of preferences and ideas. Those who received benefits from the economic reform tended to

support market economy and current policies, but those who lost interest in the reform were inclined to criticise the economic and political reforms. They owed social problems like inequality and injustice to reform, and proposed their own blueprints of reform. Mao Fans and Neo-Confucianists wish to "return to the past". They either had nostalgic feelings for the Mao era or would like to revive the tradition of Confucianism. US-cent Party, Liberals and Neo-liberals claim to "resort to the West". They prefer Western systems and cultures and explain China's development with Western theories. They also hold views that the social problems China now faces would be better addressed if it implements further economic and political reforms.

5.2. Rapid Globalisation and the Internet

In the era of globalisation, connections between nations are growing stronger, while competition is becoming more intense and shows new characteristics. Ideology becomes an important resource for strengthening a country's "soft power". In this sense, value permeation and value exportation are more frequent further pluralising ideologies in individual countries. On the other hand, globalisation provides a wide range of opportunities for people to conduct social interaction and cultural exchange. People's living space increasingly expands and breaks through geographical restrictions. Many Chinese who travel or study abroad[8] are exposed to diversified cultures and different political systems. These situations largely influence the public's political opinions.

This trend has been enhanced by the rapid development of cyber society. The Internet provides a platform for official and unofficial ideologies and ideas to present themselves. Since 2009 the Internet has covered every Chinese city and 99% of rural villages. As of June 2018, the number of Chinese netizens has reached 802 million, constituting the

largest online population in the world (China Internet Network Information Centre, 20 August 2018). The Internet, especially with the rise of social media like *Sina Weibo* and *WeChat*, is growing into an important space for the Chinese population to voice their opinions. It tremendously reduces cost of communication and information. More and more Chinese people have access to political discussions and even organise collective political action through social media sites or instant messengers.

Since 2013, Xi's leadership has strengthened online ideological control. In February 2014, the party established a central leading group on cyberspace affairs to enhance Internet governance (Xi, 2014). Thereafter, the party has taken a series of actions to control online political expression, such as censoring unfavoured content, shutting down "unqualified" social media accounts and hiring commentators to guide online opinions, to guarantee its leadership on the Internet (*Radio Free Asia*, 1 July 2017). Yet diversity in cyberspace is far from being eradicated. Although official ideologies may have become more influential online, there are still divergent opinions. A recent study found that the CCP has allowed certain diversity and criticism in online ideological debates, an indication of its newfound confidence in manipulating opinions online (Shi-Kupfer and Ohlberg, 2018).

5.3. Vibrant Pop Culture

The vibrant pop culture in Chinese Internet has facilitated netizens in the organization and mobilisation of political expressions. Owning to the market reform, China's Internet economy gave rise to a vibrant fandom culture online. Active users of various social media sites, especially fandom-related, provide the foundation for some of the ideological clusters to recruit and mobilise participants for their online debates.

In fandom culture, fans who share the same idols or maintain similar values form groups through the social media network (Fiske, 1992; Zhang, 2016). These groups often forge common identities through online interactions, and some would adopt a common group name or label to reinforce their identities. Often, different fandom groups would fight online in support of their respective idols and downplaying others. Such fights, which take place in high frequency, force the fandom groups to establish self-organisation (Chen and Lin, 2016). Many of the fan communities even established action guidelines and discipline inspection mechanisms. Different fan groups often intensively fight in Chinese cyberspace. This provides organisational capability for them to participate in online ideological debates.

6. Discussions

In this article we study ideological clusters in Chinese online space. The general trend is the competition between diversified ideologies. These different clusters of ideological positions emerged against the background of globalisation and a network era, and expressed various attitudes towards China's economic and political reform. Meanwhile, some groups attempt to propose their solution to social problems China now encounters. These findings contribute to our understanding on how political cleavages emerge.

Our study also has implications for the understanding on regime stability in China. The ideological clusters we identify do not reveal a cleavage between pro- or anti-government preferences. Those rightist clusters may prefer a political reform towards democracy, but they may not go to opposition as long as the regime still maintains room for market economy. For those clusters on the left, although they are not happy with market reform and rising inequalities, they support the

authoritarian regime. In this sense, the ideological cleavage in China does not suggest the emergence of a consolidated opposition to the regime. In addition, the debates among clusters rarely involve offline mobilisation or collective actions; they therefore do not post a direct threat to the regime.

This study focuses on discussing the political propositions behind each ideology label on the Chinese Internet. The labels, however, are in constant change. For instance, "Angry Youths" (愤青), which was widely used by Chinese netizens a decade earlier (Yang and Zheng, 2012), has rarely been mentioned in the cyberspace nowadays. During Hong Kong's anti-extradition bill movement in 2019, the Mainland Chinese netizens who spammed Hong Kong protesters' social media pages were no longer labelled as "Little Pinks", but "Fandom Girls" (饭圈女孩).[9] Nevertheless, this does not indicate that Chinese netizens' ideological structure follows such a capricious pattern. As the labels switch from one to another, their content and the general configuration do not necessarily change accordingly. This suggests the need for more accurate study on Chinese cyber ideology, through the integration of both studies on labelled clusters and surveys on individual netizens' particulars. In this aspect, the report by the Mercator Institute has made an important first step (Shi-Kupfer *et al.*, 2017). Following such efforts, there still needs further studies on this topic to reveal the determining factors of the Chinese cyber ideologies.

Xi has placed high emphasis on "ideological security". A couple of central leading groups were set up to oversee "ideological construction" and governance.[10] More and more research institutes and think tanks were encouraged to participate in ideological research (Menegazzi, 2014). The focus of ideological construction is on promoting the "China Path", which is considered as an alternative to the "Western Model". Under such circumstances, control over the Internet has been

significantly tightened and the room for online expression reduced. The party-state has been playing an increasingly proactive role in guiding online public opinions, such as deploying the Fifty-cent Army or encouraging certain fandom groups to defend the government. In this sense, we predict that online ideological diversity will shrink in the near future and pro-liberal ideological clusters may be further marginalised.

However, this does not mean that ideological plurality will vanish from the Chinese Internet. A recent study shows that even when there was strict online opinion control, the party-state would purposely leave certain room for dissenting political views online, so as to better monitor and manipulate public opinions. (Shi-Kupfer and Ohlberg, 2018). On the other hand, Chinese netizens have developed many tricks to circumvent the censorship and continue their discussions. During the course of the 2019 Hong Kong protest, netizens used words like "southern little town" or "fishing village" to refer to Hong Kong, avoiding censorship.[11] Therefore, the red line set by the government is not a solid line, but a dash line. There is still space, however limited, for Chinese netizens to express unorthodox opinions in the cyberspace.

It is still too early to draw any conclusion on whether political views in the Chinese Internet will have an impact on the long-term political development in the country. On the one hand, the government is not necessarily heeding public opinions form the Internet. Although there are studies revealing that local leaders are responsive towards citizens' online suggestions, the responsiveness is selective and limited to socioeconomic issues (Meng *et al.*, 2017; Su and Meng, 2016). Anything related to political issues are much less likely to receive a response. On the other hand, online opinions are reflections of netizens' values and political attitudes in the real world. Whether political views in the cyberspace affect China's political development depends ultimately on political orientations of Chinese netizens, most of whom

belong to the young generation. Some recent studies show that the young generation in China increasingly holds values similar to their Western peers, as modernisation theory predicts. For instance, they are becoming more and more individualistic and attaching more importance to post-materialistic values like environmental protection, gender equality, and identity issues (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). Contrary to modernisation theory, however, Chinese youth may not necessarily embrace Western democracy when it comes to their political preferences (Shan and Chen, forthcoming). The clusters of Chinese online ideologies, like Imperial Han, Young Marxists, and the Little Pinks, are manifestation of the youth resembling their Western peers in values yet not becoming more pro-democratic. To understand the evolving Chinese politics would require us to follow more closely how the modernisation process affects citizens' values and political orientations. Simultaneously, we would also need to pay close attention to how the party-state adjusts its ideology to guide citizens' political preferences.

Notes

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1. Many scholars argue that multiple party competition is an important source in shaping the public's political attitudes, which helps to form dimensional structure of ideology in democratic regimes (Jacobson, 2012; Bakker *et al.*,

2012).

2. We benefit from the research of Kristin Shi-Kupfer *et al.* in identifying the ideological clusters (Shi-Kupfer *et al.*, 2017).
3. It means the Fifty-cent Army without payment (自帶乾糧的五毛).
4. The "Fifty-cent Army" is considered to be a group of hired and paid commentators by the government. This term is well known because they are rumoured to be paid 50 cents for each post they have made (King *et al.*, 2017).
5. Apart from those, there are other websites and forums like *MITBBS* (未名空間 , *mitbbs.com*), *Worldlook* (國際觀察), *CCTHERE* (西西河 , *ccthere.com*), as well as military forums such as *CJDBY* (超級大本營 , *it.cjdby.net*) and *SBANZU* (上班族 , *sbanzu.net*) and so on (Han, 2015).
6. Please see the post summarising major propositions of Imperial Han at *Douban* (28 January 2011). <*https://www.douban.com/note/132119390/*> (accessed on 18 August 2019).
7. Netizens who are tagged this label often debate these issues in social media sites, e.g. *zhihu*. Please see discussion threads at <*https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/33155124*> and <*https://www.zhihu.com/question/67644094/answer/263971209*> (accessed on 20 August 2019).
8. According to a big data report on China's overseas tourism, the number of Chinese tourists who travelled abroad in 2018 reached 149 million; the figure has since been on an upward trend. In 2018, there were over 0.66 million Chinese people who studied abroad, constituting the world's largest source of overseas students. See <*https://www.travelweekly-china.com/73800*>, and <*http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/gzdt_gzdt/s5987/201903/t20190327_375704.html*> (accessed on 26 August 2019).
9. This label is widely used in Chinese social media site *Weibo*. Netizens who are tagged this label are fans of different pop stars. Their actions of defending the government received extensive attention and were even praised by official media. Please see *Weibo* discussion thread on Fandom

Girls. <*https://s.weibo.com/weibo/%23%E9%A5%AD%E5%9C%88%E5%A5%B3%E5%AD%A9%23*> (accessed on 18 August 2019).

10. Including the Central Small Leading Group on Propaganda and Ideological Work, the Central Small Leading Group on Cyberspace Affairs, the Central Small Leading Group on Humanities and Social Sciences, and the Central Small Leading Group on External Propaganda Work.
11. Hong Kong was a fishing village in southern China before British colonial rule. Therefore, Chinese netizens use these terms to refer to Hong Kong.

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