Cross-Strait Frenemies: Chinese Netizens VPN in to Facebook Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

Contributing to research on social activism as a form of collective action, we report on Diba, a sizable group of Chinese nationalists, who overcame the Great Firewall in order to troll Taiwan’s political leadership. Diba’s political activism can be characterized as negotiating a tension between two seemingly opposed goals. On the one hand is their construction of a pro-PRC message using the tactics of Internet subcultures (memes, trolling, etc.), but toned down to meet standards of civility. On the other hand, by collectively breaching the Great Firewall and establishing Facebook accounts, the group transgressed PRC technical and legal norms, which were designed to prevent unsanctioned collective action. We argue that the Diba Expedition exemplifies the coordinated use of a complex, transnational social media ecology to support and produce a mass-scale event and newsworthy spectacle, loosened if not severed from state control, and a discursively innovative polysemous message targeted at diverse international audiences: civilized trolling.

CCS Concepts: • Human-centered computing—Computer supported cooperative work
• Human-centered computing—Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing

Keywords: Collective action; China; Taiwan; Cross-Strait relations; Internet subculture; netizens; trolling; politics; activism

ACM Reference format:
Shengnan Yang, Pei-Ying Chen, Patrick C. Shih, Jeffrey Bardzell and Shaowen Bardzell. Cross-Strait Frenemies: Chinese Netizens VPN in to Facebook Taiwan, PACMHCI, 1, 2, Article 115 (November 2017), 19 pages. https://doi.org/10.1145/3134750

Introduction

Current discussion of collective actions facilitated by ICTs largely focuses on how new technologies facilitate offline movements leading to a perceived social good. Examples include Arab Spring, Wikipedia, Mechanical Turk, coordination during crises, and most recently, the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong [30]. The collective action at the center of such studies unfolds using public infrastructures in ways that they were intended to be used—even in
controversial cases, such as the activities of Anonymous. More recent studies consider forms of social action that transgress state IT infrastructure and, more importantly, power, for example, in the Arab Spring.

In this study, we report on a collective action of a group of Chinese (PRC) nationalists, who both transgress and champion state power. The netizens are from one of the largest discussion forums in China, known as Diba (帝吧). On January 20th, 2016, members of the group coordinated to overcome China’s Great Firewall to flood the Facebook pages of Taiwanese politicians and news agencies with a pro-PRC message, a cyberattack referred to as the “Diba Expedition to Facebook.”

We characterize Diba’s collective action as negotiating a tension between two seemingly opposed goals. On the one hand is their construction of a pro-PRC message using the tactics of Internet subcultures (memes, trolling, etc.), but toned down to meet standards of civility. This aspect of the action is consistent with Diba’s transition from outsider subculture to its increasing mainstreaming within authorized forms of expression in China. On the other hand, by collectively breaching the Great Firewall and establishing Facebook accounts, the group transgressed PRC technical and legal norms, which were designed to prevent unsanctioned collective action. Diba’s action confronted its Taiwanese audience/targets with a different contradiction: an act of aggression in the form of a cyberattack declaring outright ownership of the island, and an act of fraternal embrace with an (intended) tone of civility and strong visual and discursive signifiers of Chinese-Taiwanese cultural ties.

Based on direct observation and the acquisition of planning documents, a quantitative analysis of more than 26,000 comments to a single post on Taiwan President Tsai’s Facebook page on January 20, 2016, and follow-up interviews, we argue that the Diba Expedition exemplifies the coordinated use of a complex, transnational social media ecology to support and produce a mass-scale event and newsworthy spectacle, loosened if not severed from state control, and a discursively innovative polysemous message targeted at diverse international audiences: civilized trolling. In doing so, the activists replicated sociotechnical tactics seen in other activist practices, such as Arab Spring and Anonymous, while exploring and developing new online activist tactics. As with CSCW research on Arab Spring [1,45,52] and the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement [30], this research also contributes to the decentering of Western perspectives in HCI and CSCW [14,32].

Related Work
Collective action is a key concept in CSCW research. We contribute to ICT-enabled social activism, which is occurring at a much larger scale than is previously possible in part due to the wide spread adoption of ICTs. Below, we review CSCW research on collective action, with an emphasis on social activism. We further delineate the subversive nature of Diba Expedition as an emerging form of online activism enabled by ICTs that is deeply rooted in the unique context of Cross-Strait tension between China and Taiwan with both similarities and departures from similar cases documented in the research literature.

Collective Action
Group work has long been considered to be the staple of CSCW research. CSCW research has formulated group work, particularly cooperative work that are highly coupled, to be a form of collective action. Early research such as [8] and [13] that compared intra-group work in departmental units within an organization to distributed work such as collaborative scientific work [23] that relies on information [48] and transport [28] infrastructure, suggests that collective action is a long-term and continuous effort to sharing resources and achieving common objectives. A common theme in this type of collective action is the focus on routine and
temporality of the ongoing interactions in situated settings such as homes [40], hospitals [37], and online gaming and collaborative virtual environments (CVEs) [4]. Activities in this space generally require some kind of organizational effort and hierarchy to facilitate the exchange of group work. More recently, CSCW research has expanded to include collaboration at the community level such as nonprofit fundraising [17] and food sharing [15] in local communities.

Coordination in online environments has also been framed as collective action. Research in this space can be exemplified by crowdsourcing or citizen science platforms. Online contribution to Wikipedia articles [2] and online micro-tasking platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk [18] are touted as coordination platforms that make collective action possible. Collective actions that take place on these platforms are typically short-lived, one-off, and ephemeral activities that are organized in bottom-up, grassroots fashion. For example, research has focused on the phenomena of digital volunteers who gather to coordinate, share, and distributed pertinent information in social media during crisis [33,36,49]. Research has also focused on coordinating members to participate in flash-mob-like activities [5]. Another kind of collective action that has been investigated by CSCW research is computer-mediated communication. Some researchers consider the act of simply liking, sharing posts, and socializing on web forums [16] and social media platforms such as Reddit [21] as a form of collective action. The characteristics that set this type of collective action apart from others are that the activities are typically asynchronous; there is very little coordination involved as the activities are generally highly decoupled and less dependent on other participants.

**Social Media and Political Protests**

Here we summarize cases of social activism that are supported by social media platforms. We distinguish social activism that is facilitated by social media platforms but takes forms in physical-world protests versus those that take place strictly online.

A prominent case of social media-enabled social activism is the Arab Revolution, in which social media has been attributed to facilitate collaboration, coordination, and communication of protesters, leading to the eventual toppling of the established regime in North Africa and the Middle East. Due to the difficulty of data collection, social activism researchers initially focused on social media platforms such as Twitter and blogs. For example, Starbird and Palen analyzed the propagation of the “progress bar” meme on Twitter posted by those who were on-the-ground in Cairo versus those who were not and found that social media helped declare solidarity within their cause [45]. Similarly, Al-Ani et al. [1] found that blogging provided Egyptians a platform to report and comment on the uprising by communicating information and opinions that were not generally available through state-run media. The Egyptian government’s attempt to control the blog space by arresting several prominent bloggers was unsuccessful due to the availability of the large quantity of blog posts about revolution and dissent against the government.

The Arab Revolution did not merely unfold online, but had a considerable physical presence with massive protests in the streets, e.g., of Tunis and Cairo. Researchers have argued that relying only on social media misses important aspects of the social activism. For example, Saeed et al. collected on-the-ground interviews and observations in order to enrich the perspectives that were made available strictly based on social media data [39]. Likewise, Wulf et al. carried out an on-the-ground investigation of the Arab Revolution in Tunisia and found that French satellite TV, which had reported WikiLeaks results and which were further propagated on social media, was an important factor in mobilizing protesters to challenge the Tunisian regime [52]. Wulf et al. conducted another on-the-ground study of how Palestinian political activists utilize social media to organize and publicize weekly demonstrations under the conditions of military occupation. They characterize very different groups and uses of social media. On the ground, activists—often not understanding ways that the technologies they are using can be used against
them, for example, by state surveillance—use social media for both everyday life and their activism. Among their international online supporters, there is much more awareness of and anxiety about the possible repercussions of their participation in protests even by posting memes [51].

In the Chinese context, Kow et al. [30] studied the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, a pro-democracy protest that unfolded in the autumn of 2014. Kow et al. found that the protesters utilized an ecology of tools such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, Google Docs, and Firechat to cater to various coordination and communication activities. Thus, in both the Arab Spring and Umbrella Movement cases, activists constructed an ad hoc ecology of social media tools to counter state power, including the power to surveille, to censor, and to put out government-friendly messaging or propaganda. In doing so, they were able to achieve a massive scale of participation as well as media and political impacts—a theme we return to later.

**Online Activism as Collective Action**

In contrast to physical social activism that is facilitated by social media, virtual forms of social activism are also taking shape. Researchers have labeled online participation in social activism with low time commitment as "slacktivism" [7], and partaking in liking and sharing posts that resonate with an individual’s ideology is increasingly commonplace.

However, a more serious form of online activism such as hacking and cyberwarfare and its level of severity has raised many concerns. For example, Anonymous embraces hacktivism in order to further its agenda, supported by various organized collectives, affinity groups, and individual authors adopting of the same alias [9]. While Anonymous is not legal, the social activism that it performs is typically perceived to be a form of social justice. But sites such as WikiLeaks are claimed to be part of an emerging form of online cyberwarfare [38]. Researchers note that the level of technical knowledge required to carry out online activism is also generally much higher than physical world social activism. For example, Tadic et al. conducted an on-the-ground study of activists in the nonprofit sector and found that they’re confronted with a lack of resources and technical know-how, and advocated for structured approach and specialized training for cybersecurity and privacy of ICTs that meet their purpose [47].

In short, online-only social activism has tended to gravitate towards low-impact slacktivism or higher impact but legally risky and/or technologically difficult online activism associated with and/or vulnerable to hacking, cybercrime, and even cyberwarfare. Further, it is typically associated with long-term campaigns (such as WikiLeaks) rather than individual public spectacles, such as Women’s March in the US. The Diba Expedition presented here was technically sophisticated, but nonetheless it created a one-day public spectacle with mass participation and received international news coverage. As we will argue, part of its efficacy stems from its ambiguous and even contradictory relations to state power, a feat made possible in part by Diba’s construction of an ad hoc, transnational ecosystem of social technologies, and its ideologically conforming yet polysemous message.

**China, Taiwan, and/On the Internet**

Before proceeding to the main body of the study, we provide more background about China's internet policies and subcultures, the nature of China’s conflict with Taiwan, and some background on Diba, beginning with a disclaimer.

**Political Background and Disclaimer**

This work presents topics situated in and shaped by the highly sensitive political dispute between China (Peoples’ Republic of China—PRC) and Taiwan (Republic of China—ROC). To summarize:
Today, Taiwan operates as a de facto independent and democratic nation. The PRC claims that Taiwan is a renegade province and must be reunited with the Mainland, by force if necessary. In Taiwan, there are two views on Taiwan’s relationship to the Mainland, each represented by a political coalition: The Blue coalition (led by the KMT party) views Taiwan as a part of China (if not the PRC) and at least hypothetically seeks eventual reunification with China; the Green coalition (led by the DPP party) claims that Taiwan is already independent and should (at some point) permanently sever from the PRC. In January 2016, Taiwan elected Tsai Ing-wen of the DPP as President of the ROC, angering the PRC. This paper studies a group of netizens in PRC who organized to express their pro-PRC views by bombarding the Facebook pages of Tsai Ing-wen as well as other political leaders and Taiwanese news organizations.

This research was conducted by a team of researchers originally from the People’s Republic of China, Taiwan, and the United States. Neither the researchers nor the research take any stance here concerning China’s and Taiwan’s competing claims of sovereignty. Nor do we wish to celebrate or censure the actions of the netizens whose activities we present, but only to understand them and how the specificities of their sociotechnical context shaped their collective action in ways that the CSCW research community has not, as far as we can tell, seen or taken into account before.

**Chinese Internet, Online Activism, and Online Subculture**

Since the introduction of the Internet in 1994, the population of Internet users in China has increased tremendously, reaching 710 million by June 2016 [6]. Although the assumed distributed and ubiquitous nature of the Internet intrigued many scholars to speculate whether it will transform the authoritarian state, Yang [53] argued that the domestication of the Internet in China through building the Great Firewall creates a “Chinese Internet” rooted in pre-existing conventions and social relations.

From the very beginning, Internet development in China has been caught between the state’s control and regulation and market competition for profit, and thus generates a potentially contested space for user’s creative practices, including the following: Internet literature; the practice of spoofing, known as egao (惡搞); Internet/new media events, which are known as wangluoshijian (网络事件); as well as Internet and cell phone jokes [53]. We stress that egao is a different form of spoofing than, say, The Onion in the West. It is a mode of satire that in its use of the medium and in its complex semantics is distinctive to the Chinese ecology. Meng [35] argues that egao is an Internet enabled, new discursive mode and communicative practice that allows users to generate new meanings through re-contextualization and re-interpretation of official media contents, probing discrepancies between official and popular discourses. As a result, the acts of creativity embodied in these practices constitute the collective actions of resistance against government/official discourses, and thus challenge the hierarchical order by making fun of its absurdity.

Of course, the Chinese Internet is also home to pro-government activists. For example, the 50[ent] party includes netizens for hire to perform state-sanctioned astroturfing by posting fabricated social media comments—as a way to achieve reverse censorship [27]. Kou et al. interviewed Chinese netizens who circumvented censorship and they also found that the perception of censorship is much more nuanced than what is typically expected in the Western perspective [29]. The Internet behind the Great Chinese Firewall is thus not a homogenous, conflict-free space, but rather one of ideological and expressive contestation. Within such an ecology, Diba flourishes.
Diba (帝吧)

Diba (帝吧, literally “Board of the Emperor”), also known as liyibar (李毅吧, literally “Board of Li Yi”), is one of the largest boards on Baidu Tieba (百度贴吧, literally “Baidu Paste Board”) with more than 26 million and 900 million posts as of early 2017. Under the slogan that “everybody can be the Emperor,” Diba is widely considered one of the birthplaces of the Chinese Internet subculture, leading the way in creating numerous Internet memes such as diaosi (屌丝, literally “fans of male pubic hair”, referring to “losers” in the society) [42,46]. While these Internet subcultures are criticized by the mainstream media for its vulgarity and deviant nature, the endowed spirit of resistance and playfulness made them extremely popular among the young Chinese population, particularly the post-1990s generation.

Initially a fan-based community of the former Chinese soccer player Li Yi, the board was taken over by anti-fans of Li Yi in 2005 after the soccer player boasted that he was as good as the famous French forward Thierry Henry at ball possession. Self-labelling as yisi (毅丝, literally fans of Li Yi) or D si (D丝, fans of D, the alliterative of the “emperor” in Chinese), the group of anti-fans not only made fun of Li Yi by calling him Li Yi “the Emperor” but also satirized Chinese society at large through creative practices of spoofing, or egao [42]. At the same time, Diba has also been involved in numerous baoba incidents as early as 2007. Baoba (爆吧), or “bursting the bar” (i.e., the discussion board), refers to a unique online collective action prevalent in Baidu’s Tieba communication platform. It is usually triggered by intergroup conflicts in online forums, taking the form of flooding the antagonists’ boards with massive amount of irrelevant and swearing posts to impede the regular communication [25]. While baoba is negatively perceived as cyber harassment, it also creates a space for participants to express their grievance or resentment and derive enjoyment through engaging in a carnival-like collective practices [34]. Since 2014, however, a new team of moderators cooperates with Baidu administrators to transform Diba into advocates of mainstream values, a move consistent with the Chinese government’s political/ideological agenda encouraging positive speeches and deeds [42].

The Diba Expedition to Taiwan

In the Expedition, Diba engaged in a highly organized cyber-attack of a Taiwanese political leader. As noted above, on January 20, 2016 (the day of President Tsai Ing-wen’s inauguration) featuring the posting of an overwhelming number of social media comments in support of a PRC-sanctioned message. The Diba Expedition can be understood as an instance of baoba. What makes the Diba Expedition unusual, however, is that it is the most well-known example in which the Chinese online subculture went across the Great Firewall and took place on Facebook, a platform outside of the Chinese Internet system, both transgressing technical and political norms while exposing their actions to an international audience. In spite of the transgressive nature of the action, “Diba Expedition” (帝吧出征) was highly praised by Chinese official media, in contrast to comparable activities in the past that lacked its explicit pro-government ideology. Yet—reflecting the complexity of Diba’s relationship with the PRC government—the Expedition was shut down after a few days.

As with Anonymous and other online activists, the action required significant technical expertise, exceeding the general knowledge of the typical Chinese population to bypass the Chinese Great Firewall. In contrast to Wulf et al.’s [51,52] findings, evidence from the Diba Expedition shows that the active participants were well aware of state surveillance, including PRC surveillance and the possibility that we—in requesting to interview them for our study—might be cyber-spies from the West or Taiwan. They were also aware of online discursive conventions, seeking to appear “civil” during their attack, so as to differentiate themselves from more common forms of trolling more noted for their vulgarity.
Contribution

We argue that as ICTs continue to evolve and be adopted by the masses, cases like the Diba Expedition might serve as models for future actions. Specifically, we believe that the Diba Expedition offers a model of online social action in the form of a massive-scale and newsworthy event, comparable in news-mediated spectacle to traditional physical protests. Further, we see Diba carrying forward a sociotechnical strategy seen in prior studies: the construction of ad hoc transnational sociotechnical ecologies to counter state power.

But unlike with the Arab Spring, the Umbrella Movement, and Anonymous, the Diba Expedition was not seeking to undermine or overthrow state power; and unlike 50c, the Expedition was also not merely a tool for the state. Instead, the Diba Expedition had a sideways relationship with the state, simultaneously violating China’s sociotechnical laws and norms while promoting a pro-PRC political ideology. Similarly, it both attacked Taiwan’s sovereignty while addressing itself to (and therefore acknowledging) Taiwan’s elected President on the day of her inauguration.

In developing a deliberately ambiguous discursive strategy—civil trolling—the Diba Expedition also innovated on sociotechnically mediated political messaging, effectively addressing itself to several diverse audiences, including PRC government censors (to allow the Expedition to happen), Taiwanese citizens sympathetic to China (to invite them to re-unify with China), Taiwanese citizens hostile to China (to troll them), international news media (to get their side heard, and indeed the event was reported in the Wall Street Journal and Foreign Policy, among others) and netizens within China (to persuade them to participate in numbers).

Methodology

We used a mixed-method approach for this study, including online participant observation, interviews, and the quantitative analysis of a sample of comments and their authors, to understand both the social media ecology and patterns of engagement in DiBa Expedition. While data collection is extremely difficult due to the political nature of the event, we hope that by applying a mixed-methods approach we would be able to uncover perspectives of the event by triangulating and synthesizing findings across multiple sources.

Data Collection

We began by critically reading numerous online news articles and short commentaries documenting and reflecting about Diba Expedition. We then conducted qualitative online observations of several groups related to the Diba Expedition across different platforms to provide an analysis of the technical affordances and how they shape the collective action. The first author joined two out of four QQ (i.e., a Chinese social media platform) task-force groups that were still active after the expedition; these task-force groups had been core to organizing and coordinating the expedition. Although these QQ groups were dismissed soon after, we were able to collect internal strategy planning documents responsible for coordinating inspection, reporting, and “liking” posts. These documents include the action plan, translations of Nostalgia to different variants of Chinese and Cantonese languages, a Cantonese version of Zhou Ziyu Incident converted from Simplified Chinese, a list of available Facebook accounts, the Bopomofo (Chinese phonetic) table to assist Diba members in translation from Simplified Chinese (used on the Mainland) to Traditional Chinese (used in Taiwan), multiple sets of expression packages, and several recommended VPN software options.

As suggested by a key informant, who was one of the coordinators in charge of the inspection and supervision of the Expedition, we also joined two closed groups on Facebook, Diba zhongyang jituanjun (帝吧中央集团军, literally “Diba Central Army”) and Chaoyang qunzhong (
朝阳群众， literally “Chaoyang People”), as well as one public group, *Liangan sandi jiaoliu daluntan* (两岸交流大论坛, literally “Forum on the Communication between Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong”), using a newly created account named "Study Diba" with an implicit understanding of the potential risk that revealing our personal identity could invite trolling from participants of the Expedition.

Overall, our observations and interactions with Diba members on these social media platforms spanned over a period of two months between March and April, 2016. Throughout our exchanges with Diba members in these online groups, we asked questions such as whether there were specific Facebook pages targeted during the expedition, whether they perceived participation like playing an online game, and if any of the members were central to organizing and coordinating the expedition.

To better understand participants’ personal cause for joining the Expedition, we conducted interviews within a month after the expedition. The interview participants were recruited after four rounds of private and public recruitment through various channels including Weibo, the aforementioned QQ task-force groups and Facebook groups. All three interviews were conducted in text-based CMC, with one via QQ and two via Facebook Messenger. We asked questions about their personal political stances (e.g., pro-Taiwan, pro-China, or neutral), whether they have previously engaged in similar online collective action, motivation for and ways of participation, and personal experiences, perception, and reaction to the expedition. The interview process was cut short due to Diba members’ suspicion of our identity and intention, which we elaborate on later in the paper.

In addition to qualitative data collected through participatory observation and interviews, we selected one of the posts that received most comments on Taiwan President Tsai’s Facebook Page during the Expedition and crawled all 26,000+ top-level comments through Facebook Graph API. The dataset included key information such as author’s username and ID, message, creation time, and counts of likes, providing rich materials for quantitative analysis of participants’ patterns of engagement.

**Data Analysis**

Since the majority of the 26K comments is consisted of lines copied and pasted from the officially designated messages, we focused on attributes such as frequency count and number of messages over time for our quantitative analysis. The set of 26K comments was analyzed quantitatively in Excel for summary statistics and RStudio for content analysis and text mining. We first identified the unique number of participants by cross-validating their IDs and usernames and analyzed the temporal pattern of how Diba members posted comments during the attack. To collect empirical evidence of the prevalence of officially designated messages in the posted comments, we then used Rwordseg [24] and tmcm [31] in the R environment to segment and mine comments with custom dictionary. The custom dictionary consisted of terms imported from *Sougou Chinese Lexicon Database* (搜狗词库) under the subcategory of “politics” and the officially designated messages, and each line of text was treated as the unit for segmentation. It also included the unofficial yet popular messages posted in the comments as well as catchwords popular among Chinese netizens. Because the participants improvised and posted several different variations of the officially designated messages, it was hard to determine the precise count of each official message. The workaround we devised was to approximate the frequencies by averaging the count of each official/popular message instead of identifying all variations of them.

For qualitative analysis, we analyzed comments posted by active ‘spectators’ who left comments with no intention of taking part in the attack using open coding [10]. We also synthesized data collected from multiple sources (e.g., news articles, short commentaries, social media posts in Weibo, QQ, and Facebook groups, internal strategy planning documents, etc.) that
resulted in the reconstruction of the event of Diba Expedition. We then manually coded and analyzed the interview transcripts using open coding [10]. Although we were only able to collect 3 interviews throughout our recruitment process due to the political sensitive nature of the event, we were able to learn valuable lessons about the participating members concerns and perception about the event. We provide a detailed discussion about these findings and what we were able to uncover, to the best of our abilities, using the mixed-methods approach in the Results and Concluding Discussion sections.

Results

We present our results in four sections. In the first, “The Diba Expedition” we present findings from our reconstruction of events as well as qualitative data collection and analysis. In the second, “The Social Media Ecology of the Diba Expedition,” we consider ways that China’s unique sociotechnical ecology shaped Diba’s collective action in particular ways. Next, in “Patterns of Engagement in the Diba Expedition” we offer a quantitative analysis of tens of thousands of the posts to understand in a more detailed way what were the mechanisms and outcomes of the bombardment. Finally, in “Vulnerable Bullies?” we reflect on our struggles to build trust with Diba as well as a few insights from the interviews we were able to conduct.

The Diba Expedition

“Diba Expedition to Facebook” was an online campaign nominally initiated by liyibar, aimed at scaling the Great Firewall of China and flooding targeted Facebook pages deemed to be aligned with pro-Taiwan independence. It was partly prompted by a mini-scandal surrounding the 16-year-old Taiwan-born Chou Tzu-yu, a singer in a multinational band, who in November 2015 held up the Republic of China flag in a television broadcast in South Korea to signify her birthplace. Netizens in China erupted with accusations that she was a traitor to China, which prompted an abject video recorded apology from the teen as well as her band’s management, which in turn prompted protests from Taiwan-based netizens and negative press for China in the West, in its turn angering Diba members.

Beginning at 7 pm on January 20, 2016 CST (China Standard Time), tens of thousands of comments against Taiwan independence appeared in posts of Taiwan President-elect Ms. Tsai Ing-Wen’s Facebook page as well as news media’s such as Sanli News and Apple Daily. While the organizers claim to taking further steps on issues against Taiwan independence, the event lasted for less than two days due to Chinese government’s intervention, leaving tens of thousands of comments either deleted or unattended.

The campaign prompted both positive and negative responses within and outside China, mostly by news media agencies as well as Internet users across the Strait. The comments generally focus on whether this online collective action is driven by blind patriotism/nationalism, or whether it is a promising sign of active political participation of the post-1990s generation in China [3,22,44].

A Polite and Civilized Approach to Trolling . One of the most noteworthy aspects of the Diba Expedition was their well-publicized intention to behave in a polite way, an intention that, if imperfectly executed, was at least well understood and more characteristic of their action than might be expected. This does not suggest that all of them were polite, and metaphors of violence (including “bursting the bar” and the language of “battle”) also abounded. Even so, an internal document laying out the action plan identified that their “main task” was “to give a Like” (点赞) to posts from pro-PRC groups, and to apologize for the bullying posts from their own side (为自己人带辱骂性的帖子道歉); groups were assigned to do both tasks in rotation.
One of the informants in our interviews, a leader from the Inspection and Supervision group, affirmed that the group’s job was to give a Like “to the rational comments.” She elaborated, “I just post some rational comments in the way of pictures of scenic views and food... Although we are mad seeing the provocative posts from advocates of Taiwan-independence, such as ‘Nanking Massacre’ and ‘Comfort women’, we still try to show restraint by only posting some pictures.” She acknowledged that not everyone followed these guidelines, but stressed that they took action against them: “Once we find some members who have some extremely radical comments (太激进的，太过分的) to Taiwan, we first give them a warning, and then kick them out of the QQ-group, if their speeches won’t be modest.”

Our analysis of the boards also showed some of this at work. Some comments emphasized behavioral norms, saying things like “Please be kind and communicate nicely (好好交流不行么)” and “I am from PRC. Compatriots, please communicate rationally, and don’t bully people. Or, we just make them [i.e., the Taiwanese] laugh at us” (我是大陆人。只希望我的同胞们, 请理性说理, 不要谩骂。否则，也只是让别人看笑话罢了).

Diba’s preparations also helped them achieve this goal. Internally, before the attack, they defined in advance a repertoire of messages with pro-PRC themes, including political slogans, literary works, patriotic songs, and photos of food and scenic views. All were chosen because they were familiar to most of mainstream Chinese and were viewed as more constructive than traditional forms of bullying, spamming, and swearing. These were the primary materials to be spammed on the targeted Facebook Pages aiming to glorify China/Chinese and its Party on the one hand, and to invoke emotional bonds between China and Taiwan on the other. The former included the political slogan of Communist Party of China such as Eight Honors and Eight Shames (barong bachi, 八荣八耻), and patriotic songs such as Ode to the Motherland (歌唱祖国) and March of Volunteers (义勇军进行曲). The latter included literary works such as poems by Chinese poets Yu Guangzhong (余光中)’s Nostalgia (乡愁) and Wen Yiduo (闻一多)’s Song of Seven Sons: Taiwan (七子之歌: 台湾) as well as an elementary textbook article describing the beauty of Sun Moon Lake (日月潭) in Taiwan. We provide evidence of the prevalence of these texts in our quantitative analysis later in the paper.

The Social Media Ecology of the Diba Expedition

Two of the most noted features of the Diba Expedition were its highly organized division of labor and (intended) polite manner. Less mentioned is the role of a variety of ICTs and online platforms played in facilitating the campaign, particularly the unfolding of a cross-platform attack, using Chinese social media to organize an attack against social groups on Facebook. This is especially notable because Facebook is currently banned in China, participants had to scale the Great Firewall first and register a Facebook account in order to post comments. In this section, we reflect on how the social media ecology in China shaped the Diba Expedition, recognizing that the use of new technologies, especial those emerging in Web 2.0, is changing the way of communication, collaboration, and demonstration in collective action [11,20,26].

The organization and mobilization of Diba Expedition in a rather short period of time was realized through employing at least five different types of online platforms, including Baidu Tieba, QQ, WeChat, Weibo, and online video sharing sites (e.g., YY). Based on such a large number of users, it is not surprising to achieve considerable scale of dissemination. These platforms provided different kinds of technical affordances at different phases of action in terms of technical and designing features.

Disposition and Coordination: Tencent QQ. As the earliest and largest instant message service in China developed by Tencent, QQ has 642 million monthly active users at the end of 2015. QQ has several features supporting coordination and cooperation, making it particularly well-
received in group work. One such feature is called “QQ group”. Anyone who wants to join a QQ group has to be approved by the administrators. Upon approval, users are granted to participate in the group discussion as well as access the files or documents shared within the group. “Bulletin” and “File Sharing” are the most important features for facilitating the group discussion. As an independent section, the main function of Bulletin is for administrators to post important announcements. Located on the right side of and isolated from the main chat window, the interface allows every group member to see the announcement in Bulletin at any time. “File Sharing” is a public space for all the group members to upload and download files. In this expedition, the organizers set up nine QQ groups, each recruiting up to 500 members. The structure employed is remarkably similar to those employed in popular Massively Multiplayer Online Role-player Games (MMORPGs) raids [50]. In addition to the two headquarter groups and a front-line troop, each of the headquarters command six task-force groups in charge of following tasks under the guidance of headquarter groups [41]: information gathering (collect pro-Taiwan independence speeches and pictures); campaign and organization (posting for recruitment); armament making (writing opinions and creating images); public relations/external communication (translation of anti-Taiwan independence speeches); battlefield cleaning (report and liking posts on Facebook); specialty in Cantonese [i.e., facilitate communication between Cantonese and Mandarin speakers].

QQ groups supports coordination in the following ways. First, members can download necessary resources from file sharing space such as the attack plan, technical instructions for using VPN, texts designated as unified weapons, and expression packages. Second, after the expedition was on, updates from the frontline were synchronously reported in the group. Based on the situation, administrators of each team would pass on the commands from headquarters, and adjust the attack strategies accordingly. Also, members could share problems they encountered (e.g., unable to find available VPNs) and look for supports/solutions in QQ groups.

**Recruitment and Dissemination: Sina Weibo and Wechat**. Sina Weibo is the largest microblogging services in China combining features of both Twitter and Facebook. Launched by Sina Corporation in 2009, Sina Weibo has 222 million subscribers and 100 million daily users by the third quarter of 2015. Originally an imitator of Twitter, Sina Weibo boasted itself as the major channel of news broadcast, while its support of Facebook login for overseas users in 2013 indicated its closer alignment to social networking services like Facebook. Still, its fast dissemination of information proved powerful: an announcement posted 17 hours before the expedition by Zhao Ritian No. 233 (赵日天233号), the official Weibo account of “Diba Expedition,” was quickly forwarded over 10,000 times. The message called for followers to “launch a battle to Facebook at 7pm tonight and have a friendly conversation with Taiwan pro-independence supporters”. The term “#Diba Facebook Expedition” (#帝吧FB出征) was then jumped to the top of hottest search terms on Weibo with more than 750,000 queries. The subsequent information including “combat strategy and deployment” was announced by this official account, further making the event widely circulated and disseminated.

Unlike Weibo as a public broadcast channel, WeChat largely relies on personal networks to exchange information. Developed also by Tencent, WeChat gained huge popularity soon after its release in 2013, for its ability to send both instant voice and text messages within circles of close friends and families in addition to its integration with various service-oriented Apps on the mobile phone. The communication and exchange of information takes place through posts from either friends or public accounts created by individuals or organizations. Because the social circle on WeChat is based on the real-life network, information obtained from it is generally regarded as more reliable.

**Remote participation: Online Video Sharing Sites**. Given that Facebook is blocked in China, the major local livestream video sharing platforms (similar to Twitch [19]) such as Douyu TV
(fighting fish, 斗鱼), Bilibili (B站), Huya TV (tiger’s teeth, 虎牙), and Panda TV (熊猫) took turns to provide livestream videos broadcasting of the latest battling progress on Facebook (i.e., the growing list of comments being posted on Taiwan President Tsai’s Facebook Page) with voice-over for the Chinese netizens. It is reported that more than 100,000 users were watching the live expedition online. While the Chinese government attempted to ban the livestream broadcasting, users continued to broadcast livestream videos by creating more fake accounts in the above-mentioned platforms, creating a way of virtual participation. This is an instance of online bystanding, a common Internet subcultural practice in China, which refers to gathering to look at the progress of an event without taking part in the event per se. Instead, they participate in ways of interacting with other users through the screen displaying users’ instant comments on the screen. Originated from the Anime, Comic, and Games (ACG) culture in Japan, the effects of the barrage of comments flowing by on the screen replace the original focus and become a spectacle in their own right. The spectacle along with the dramatic voiceover from anchors creates a festive space separated from the main battlefield.

**Patterns of Engagement in Diba Expedition**

The findings presented below point to distinctive practices among participants such as sharing usernames that reference Chinese memes; the increasing frequency of official designated texts that are highly conforming to official ideologies; texts embodying the spirit of egao (i.e., Chinese spoofs, as explained above), and bystander/onlooker culture.

*Diba Expedition Participants.* We crawled 26,120 top-level comments from Taiwan President Tsai’s Facebook Page in total, associated with 16,103 different usernames and 16,890 unique IDs spanning across January 20th to February 4th. As Figure 1 shows, the peak of comments posted was around 11:00 am GMT on January 20th, which is exactly the planned starting time of Diba Expedition, i.e., 7:00 pm CST (China Standard Time).

![Fig. 1 Number of posts per hour.](image)

Most of the users posted only one comment, and the average is 1.634 comments per username. A long-tail distribution reveals that the top 2.5% active users ($N = 428$) are the main attacking force, contributing to about 20% of the total posts ($N = 5116$) (see Figure 2).

![Fig. 2 Posts frequency by most active users.](image)
Within this most active group, every username posted 6 comments at least and 12 comments on average. The most productive one posted 192 comments during this period. Two interesting findings come from the discrepant mapping result of Facebook usernames and IDs, which imply participants’ strategy. First, users might share account. We found five IDs, each of which is associated with different usernames. According to one internal document downloaded from the QQ group, some participants would register Facebook accounts in advance, and then give them to those responsible for attack. Since Facebook allows users to change their usernames anytime, we speculate whether this may be due to the sharing of accounts but changing the name to differentiate the identity.

Second, users shared some usernames to maintain the consistency of their identities. The total number of IDs is more than the number of unique usernames. Many usernames are shared by different IDs, which account for 2.82% of all 16,891 IDs. One possible reason for this practice is that during the attack, reporting and blocking accounts is a prevalent tactic used by both sides as defense. Once the account is “dead”, the user has to register for a new account to keep fighting. One commenter said that he/she was blocked over 3 times, but kept registering new accounts to fight. It is thus not surprising to see a small percentage of users who have more than one ID while maintaining the same username.

More notable is the case where one username is shared by more than 10 IDs. One possible explanation is that someone dedicates himself/herself to this event and intends to increase their visibility. However, for those usernames associated with over 30 IDs, we argue that it might be a unique strategy for attacking or trolling, because it is difficult to log into multiple accounts and post comments by a single user.

Moreover, two most frequently appeared usernames in particular, Zhaoritian (赵日天) and Yeliangchen (叶良辰), turned out to be popular nicknames used by Chinese Internet users, especially on Diba. Originally appeared as the name of the villain in an online egao story with the style of Hong Kong comic, Zhaoritian became an online meme because the name is said to be familiar to many readers of Internet novels in which the main male characters often carry similar names, and also because the character in the original novel is provocative, rampant, tyrannical, and yet handsome. The meme originated from an ACG themed video sharing site to Baidu BBS and Weibo through LOL channel on another live broadcasting website in 2014. Yelianchen is another online meme widely circulated in QQ, Baidu BBS, and Weibo which originally appeared in a QQ chat record. The name gained its popularity over the character’s grotesque and somewhat classical language. Chinese netizens use these to replace their own nicknames as an “inside joke” to demonstrate their understanding of the Chinese online subculture.

United Fronts and Guerillas. Another prominent feature of the campaign is its highly consistent form and content. An “official” profile picture was made for the Expedition (see Figure 3), with the map of China (including Taiwan) at the center in white, the imprint of “We are Chinese” on top of it, and two lines above and below read “Taiwan belongs to my country” and “Taiwan is an inalienable part of China” respectively, in both Chinese and English. Participants were encouraged to change his/her profile picture to the official Diba Expedition profile photo before the launch of the Expedition and spread the information in his/her Facebook Timeline to call for others’ attention and participation.

Not only were the profile picture unified, the bombardment of repetitive messages also came from a preselected repertoire of positive texts and images, either patriotic sources about China or Chinese texts embracing Taiwan, as described above. Notable, too, was the use of an eight-line poem with seven characters written by Mao Zedong titled Long March (七律．长征) that appeared in a tweet from the official Weibo of Communist Youth League (共青团) before the launch of expedition, interpreted as the government’s implicit consent to the action.
We obtained 17,032 terms through text mining comments, with 427,848 counts in total after removing English characters and pure numbers and setting the threshold to be at least two characters. While “Taiwan” is the most frequently mentioned term with 7598 counts, the distribution is highly skewed (mean = 22.82), with the first, second, and third quartiles being 1, 2, and 6 counts respectively. As shown in Table 1, Eight Honors and Eight Shames and Nostalgia were most frequently appeared in comments, respectively accounting for 26.4% and 8.3% of 26K comments. This should not be surprising as they were among the officially designated messages to be posted. Ode to the Motherland is another popular message appearing nearly 500 times (1.9%). The three messages account for 37% of all top-level comments, indicating a consistent alignment with the official strategy.

Beside the officially designated texts, shunkouliu —anonymous doggerel verses often of topical or political nature—also gained visibility. Alluding democracy to the Falun Dafa (literally “Dharma Wheel Practice”), a spiritual practice banned by the Chinese government, one shunkouliu mocked democracy as a form of brainwashing, making its people believe that love will generate electricity and election can cure hunger (民主大法好，全民被洗脑，用爱能打电，选票能管饱). Later this same shunkouliu claimed that the benefits of democracy were contemptuously linked with promiscuity involving sexual groping (民主有福利，摸奶少不了，大肠话女王，十万就能搞). It also pointed to the flaws of democracy, in which democratic elections can be seen as being forced to choose among a basket of rotten apples (选举是大事，其他算个鸟，几个烂苹果，不知哪个好). Moreover, while Taiwan is proud of its democracy, this shunkouliu mocked Taiwan as a watchdog of western powers, of which Japan and the United States are sugar daddies who don’t really care about Taiwan’s interests (民主有干爹，美日来指导，做了看门狗，骨头自己早). Another popular text which at first looked like a greeting to President Tsai and her Party turned out to be a satire that asked her to claim not only political but also economic independence of Taiwan from China and the United States while keeping her
promise on certain highly controversial social issues such as abolishing death penalty as well as nuclear and thermal power plants. The rationale behind this is that economic prosperity should be prioritized over democracy, which is in line with Chinese government’s long-time stance since economic reform in the 1980s. Also revealed is the Chinese people’s distrust of western democracy and emphasis on self-reliance as an independent nation free from foreign interventions.

### Table 1 Frequency of official and popular messages in comments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Repertoire</th>
<th># of lines in comments (A)</th>
<th># of lines per repertoire (B)</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CPC</td>
<td>Eight Honors and Eight Shames</td>
<td>110361</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6898</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSR</td>
<td>Nostalgia</td>
<td>34732</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS</td>
<td>Ode to the Motherland</td>
<td>22370</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>486</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satire</td>
<td>Democracy Practice is Good</td>
<td>4916</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSR</td>
<td>Song of Seven Sons: Taiwan</td>
<td>1378</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satire</td>
<td>Greetings and Appeals to Ms. Tsai</td>
<td>5456</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPC</td>
<td>Long March</td>
<td>705</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS</td>
<td>March of the Volunteers</td>
<td>665</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANC</td>
<td>Declaration of Diba Expedition</td>
<td>713</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSR</td>
<td>Sun Moon Lake</td>
<td>872</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS</td>
<td>Citizen of China</td>
<td>906</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The frequency is obtained through dividing (A) by (B). PS = patriotic songs (both political and popular), CSR = cross-strait relations, CPC = Communist Party of China, ANC = announcement.

Apart from those who actively posted officially designated texts or other offensive messages such as shunkoulius, there was a considerable number of active ‘spectators’ who left comments with no intention of taking part in the attack. This is known to be the spectator subculture common to the Chinese Internet. Two conspicuous terms related to this were “tourist group” (guanguangtuan, 观光团) and “to stand in a circle and watch” (weiguan, 围观), with counts of 171 and 254 times respectively. Many users explicitly referred to themselves as tourist groups from certain Chinese provinces/cities, foreign countries, oversea students, to social networking sites (e.g., Weibo, Tieba, Tianya, Douban, Zhihu). Typical messages are, for example, “the tourist group of Weibo is here” (微博观光团到此一游), and “the tourist group of Jianxi people says hello on behalf of Mt. Lushan” (江西人民观光团，我代表庐山向你们问好). Other terms associated with the spectator subculture included “check in” (daka, 打卡), “watch battles” (guanzhan, 观战), “watch for the fun” (kanrenao/courenao, 看/凑热闹) or simply “passing by” (luguo, 路过). Seeing Diba Expedition as a theatrical spectacle, spectators sometimes referred to themselves as being in the “front row” (qianpai, 前排) or the “back row” (houpai, 后排) connoting both chronological order (arriving earlier or later) and space (having a better spot or not). Some Chinese netizens who occupied front rows left comments in the tone of vendors selling drinks and snack (e.g., “selling peanuts, popcorn, melon seeds, Sprite, drinks, and bottled water in the front row”, 前排出售花生瓜子爆米花雪碧饮料矿泉水), creating a more vivid spectator experience.

Although it is hard to know how many participants are active members of Diba, and how many of them have previously participated in other baoba actions, the influence and reputation of Diba in Chinese online subculture is evident both from the number of spectators as well as
from the relatively high visibility of the slogan “Diba Expedition leaves nothing but scorched earth” (帝吧出征，寸草不生) that appeared around 550 times.

Compared with the officially designated texts posted by Diba participants in an organized manner, messages left by spectators were short and individualized with little repetition. The clearer distinction is the level of seriousness reflected in these messages. While the former embodied a strong sense of discipline and formality at least in terms of contents, the latter is more a continuation of online subculture in favor of light-heartedness and festiveness.

Although the Tzuyu Incident (i.e., the pop singer who displayed Taiwan’s flag) was one of the precipitating causes of the Expedition, of which many Chinese netizens felt being smeared by pro-independence Taiwanese media, the name of the 16-year-old female singer was only mentioned 170 times. This confirms previous studies [34, 54] of such baoba action that social grievance and nationalist ideology can obscure the original causes of the collective action.

Compared with previous baoba actions, the insulting words and personal attack are less frequently seen in the expedition, as boasted by the organizers and praised by the mainstream media. The frequency of harsh derogatory terms provides partial evidence to this claim, in which “pro-independence dog” (taidugo, 台独狗, used by pro-PRC netizens as a slur against Taiwanese netizens) and "china pig/haram" (zhinazhu/zhinajianchu, 支那猪/贱畜, used by Taiwanese netizens against pro-PRC ones) appeared around 600 and 30 times respectively (the English translations do not capture how insulting these terms are in Chinese).

In addition to the officially designated texts, one of the most unique features of Diba Expedition is the use of images of Chinese cuisines and scenic spots as well as expression packages (biaoqingbao, 表情包) customized for this campaign with stamps claiming its exclusive use by Diba in fear of piracy from Taiwanese netizens. Although the original intent of using images instead of texts was to evade online Chinese government censorship by embedding sensitive words or terms in image formats, it was later repurposed by the post-1990s generation into a medium for expressing their creativity with egao effects. Common practices include crafting celebrity’s facial expressions into comic profiles, direct use of celebrities with ostentatious expressions or gestures/postures, self-created figures plus a short sentence that is either vulgar or satirical. Also popular is the clipping of certain scenes with lines from movies, TV series, comics, or anime. Even after the function of posting pictures was temporarily shut down by the curator of Ms. Tsai’s Facebook page, Chinese netizens continued to post texts ended in .jpg or .gif or descriptive words as substitutes of pictures.

Vulnerable Bullies?

As part of our study, we also wanted to conduct interviews of leaders and participants of Diba to understand their perspectives on the Expedition. As summarized in the Methodology section, using Weibo, we directly messaged from one of our personal accounts to reach out to the spokesperson, who declined to participate. We also applied to join several of the groups, gaining admission to two. Upon introducing ourselves, we were immediately cursed at and kicked out of one of the groups. We also reached out to two highly active closed groups on Facebook. Concerned about being trolled ourselves, we did not use our personal accounts. We did, nonetheless, introduce ourselves and our research. After reaching out to over ten users, two agreed to one-on-one online interviews. We reflect on some of our difficulties here to be part of our findings, as we elaborate below.

Although the number of interviews was relatively small (N = 3), we still found them worthwhile. All of our interviewees expressed a strong sense of patriotism. One explained,

Everyone has a sense of patriotism [...] The young generation displays the passion of patriotism in this event. Every Chinese looks forward to the unification of China and being
a more prosperous and powerful country. Although the development in China is still insufficent, the future is promising. (respondent 2)

Another motive is to express grievance against Western media for being biased against China. Many netizens replying to our original post emphasized that, as one put it, “we want to express that nobody can spread rumors or smear China to confuse people.” One of the respondents from Facebook is studying in the US. His personal experiences of being treated discriminately triggered his willingness to support this event:

I support this event since it is a window for Chinese netizens to know how minority groups, including Asians, Africans, are discriminated against in the western countries. I experienced several cases of discrimination such as yelling me ‘go back to China you chink.’ I felt indignant. (respondent 2)

Another interviewee expressed a different motivation: to stand up to bullies: “We can't be tolerant the bullying anymore from some pro-interdependence Taiwanese. We have to defend ourselves” (respondent 1).

We faced not only difficulty in recruiting participants, but also quite a bit of suspicion and even animus. “Show us your student ID, or we suspect that you are a spy from western media or pro-independence side.” Another warned the rest of the group about us: “Guys, prevent the original poster(OP) from chatting privately!! Never answer OP’s questions, even a punctuation mark!!!! Don’t give them any cause for against us!!” Even more emphatically, one wrote, “After many years, current social science research has an even lower quality than the time I experienced. As an ex-researcher, I didn’t want to waste my time to satirize you.... Can’t you propose some professional questions?” We discussed these challenges with a journalist reporting on this event, who had also interviewed some of the participants. She described the netizens as “sensitive” and “not as open” as their online behavior would suggest, concluding, “I spent a long time to establish a personal relation with them.”

As we reflect back on the experience, both on our challenges to gain their trust and also what those who did talk to us actually said, we began to see a pattern: they felt vulnerable. They felt vulnerable to what they perceived as “bullying” from their pro-independence adversaries; to a global media machine implacably disrespectful to China; to discrimination from a globally entrenched White supremacy; to China’s still unrealized potential as a global power; to infiltration from “spies” and others hostile to their cause.

Concluding Discussion

We conclude with a discussion of three key themes that have emerged from this research: how the Chinese sociotechnical context and ecology shapes online activism; a sideways relationship with state power; and some thoughts on the nature and achievements of collective action in conflicted sociotechnical situations.

Online Activism in the Chinese Context

We have sought to show how the Diba Expedition is a socioculturally specific form of online activism, though it shares notable commonalities with other ICT-mediated social activism, including the following. First, the publicized mobilization process and the posting pattern reflected that it was planned and well-organized. Second, “micro-contributions” were gathered through social media, as most posts are contributed by single-post participants rather than the small percentage of dedicated participants. Third, it indicates an effectiveness of mobilization in a large scale within a short time. The constraint of geographic boundary is easy to overcome in a wholly online setting. Fourth, the organization still plays an important role to the mobilizing
process, although it is in the form of a virtual entity with less formalized structure. Fifth, a collective identity [43] is framed and spread by the patriotism themed posts.

At the same time, in spite of the endorsement of the PRC media and public, the Diba Expedition’s claims of “civility” and “politeness” cannot obscure the obviously negative qualities of the action. Characteristics of board-bursting baoba from the Chinese Internet subculture is inherent in the Diba Expedition. And the essence of baoba is to interrupt the targeted forum by flooding meaningless information in a short period of time, rather than effective communication and negotiation. When the baoba phenomenon took off on the Chinese Internet, moderators and operators of the targeted forums faced great pressure and troubles; moderators had to spend considerable time on tidying up the discussion boards and set up the strategies to prevent from further attacks, while the operators had to deal with complaints from moderators, take effective procedure of intervention, and devise new policies and solutions to forestall future baoba.

As an online subculture, baoba has existed on the Chinese Internet with a group of active participants even before the proliferation of social media. Two factors attributed to the popular cultural practice. Since there is a vacuum of political engagement in the traditional public sphere, the Internet plays an active and important role allowing people to express their opinions. At the same time, the tight control of Internet in China limits the freedom of public participation in politics. As a result, Internet expression is often framed as entertainment. With its strong entertaining and gaming nature, baoba is a product born in this context. It is thus not surprising to see something like Diba Expedition in which political opinions are expressed in a carnival-like manner. However, for outsiders and victims of baoba, its vulgarity (e.g., in the diaosi meme) can seem quite negative. For participants who get it, it can be entertaining and yet expressive. In the case of Diba Expedition, both organizers and participants were aware of the negative image of typical baoba, but sought to reimagine it embodying virtues of “civility,” “organized discipline,” as well as supervision of deviant behaviors. In this way, they enjoyed the benefits of creating an event and a public spectacle, while avoiding the sort of disapproval associated with traditional board-bursting and trolling.

A Sideways Relationship With State Power

The pro-PRC message and its polite framing reflect Diba’s ongoing transition from anarchic subculture to mainstream. This transition entails a negotiation of cherished antagonistic behaviors (e.g., baoba, egao, diaosi) and conformity with mainstream values, effected by the evolution of these practices. Despite the expanding influence on the online communities, previous online actions are increasingly regarded as Internet violence. But practices can change. For example, diaosi has transformed from denoting public hair and connoting lower class losers to being reappropriated as a self-deprecating term used by progressive youths aiming at upward mobility [46]. On the other hand, the themes and content of baoba are also in transition. While the earliest instances of baoba were derived from conflicts among entertainment fanboys, the conflicts driving more recent baoba are social grievances driven by nationalist sentiments, and still more recently has involved social justice (e.g., such as identifying and condemning those who have committed acts that are deemed to be immoral). Baoba is becoming more mainstream; trolling can be civilized.

Diba’s integration into the mainstream can further be seen in the vision proposed by one of its moderators, Yingsanjiage (英三嘉哥). Having taken the position as a moderator since 2014, he took explicit measures to expand Diba’s online influence to the offline world such as organizing a donation campaign for a leukemia patient [12]. The reorientation and strategy of integrating the “positive force” into the core value of Diba shows a fascinating potential of transforming from subculture to the mainstream.

From this perspective, Diba Expedition is a breakthrough in light of its influence and its recognition by the official authority. The influence and visibility of this campaign and its
Cross-Strait Frenemies: Chinese Netizens VPN in to Facebook Taiwan

The Diba Expedition unfolded within the unique system of the Chinese Internet and political environment, and its achievements are best legible as such if that context is understood. Even so, we believe that Diba is significant beyond the Chinese Internet. Our research suggests that one outcome of the Diba Expedition was its exposure of the misalignments between the legal, political, and technical infrastructures in PRC. It further exploited semantically dense forms of expression (notably poetry, satire, and photography) not just to assert the state’s official line, but always already to say more than that. Because activism depends on the ability of collectives to form, communicate, and act, this exposure, this construction of a ‘gray space’ with which to operate, is itself a consequential political act. The insurgence of such gray spaces is becoming increasingly visible to the public due to the rising tensions between anti-fascist (i.e., Antifa) and neo-Nazi groups in U.S. politics. The Internet is becoming the central breeding ground of these political extremist groups, and future CSCW research in this space is highly warranted. The Diba Expedition is one case in which such a gray space manifested in a public online demonstration of one group’s political beliefs.

The Diba Expedition—a mostly polite cyberattack on a significant scale in one of the most volatile political conflicts on the planet—embodied both a contradictory stance within China (one of ideological compliance and sociotechnical defiance) and also a contradictory stance towards Taiwan (one of aggression and also of kinship). The Diba Expedition might not have made any headway on the cross-strait tensions between PRC and Taiwan, but it proposes tactics to act collectively and politically even within settings of seemingly overwhelming state power. Through this action, Diba navigated within, embodied, and symbolized the contradictions facing a rising Chinese generation, energized by its sociotechnical savvy, negotiating with a controlling party-state that it will soon inherit, and yet facing an all too familiar frenemy across the Strait of Taiwan.

Acknowledgements

We thank our participants and the reviewers for their helpful comments. This work was supported in part by the National Science Foundation under award 1513604 and a Mellon Innovating International Research, Teaching and Collaboration Fellowship.
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Received June 2017; revised July 2017; accepted November 2017