

## RESEARCH NOTE

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# WHO ARE THE INFLUENTIALS IN CHINA'S CYBERSPACE AND WHAT DO THEY SAY ABOUT THE ISSUE OF SINO-JAPANESE RELATIONS?

### Abstract

This research note explores an increasingly prominent, but often neglected, communication group in China's cyberspace—the online “influential” (big Vs or verified users)—who shape public perceptions, including on foreign policy issues. Examining threads on Sino-Japanese relations on Weibo reveals a diverse ecosystem that includes not only established media agencies and government agencies, but public intellectuals, whose role and presence are quite central. An analysis of the content of posts finds that influentials have similarly diverse viewpoints on Sino-Japanese relations; some have broken with the conflict-focused discourses that have prevailed on Weibo, reflecting a competing narrative espousing the need for greater pragmatism towards Japan. The findings call into question the argument that social media necessarily trends toward greater nationalism.

### Key words

online influential, China's cyberspace, Sino-Japanese relations

## INTRODUCTION

The sweeping trends of media commercialization and digitalization have dramatically reconfigured the political communication landscape in China (Shirk 2011; Yang 2009; Zhao 2008). Although the official media still hold a monopoly over the dissemination of political news, especially regarding significant domestic and foreign relations issues, most Chinese citizens are exposed to such content not through official media sources directly, but rather through the selection, reposting, and reinterpretation of such news content by digitally active and influential actors (Schneider 2017; Svensson 2014).

Despite these trends and transformations in the media ecology, though, China-focused media research has tended to present an image of an “atomized” public (Karlsen 2015), implying that netizens receive the same media content in isolation, and that the messages received have immediate effects on such individuals. On the one hand, since state-run propaganda still underpins the Chinese media space, many studies have examined media discourses produced by China's party organs, supposing a direct, causal relation between the state's official narratives and public opinions (Shirk 2011; Zhao 2008). On the other hand, because of the mass deliberation in China's cyberspace, technology-savvy and politically engaged netizens are increasingly recognized as a rising, and

alternative, bloc of information providers, and the content they produce is considered to have a noticeable and direct impact on other net users and on China's communication space as a whole (Huang and Yip 2012). Accordingly, a research approach that views political communication as a two-step information-flow process in which media messages are further mediated and interpreted by a small group of "influentials" and then diffused to the broader audiences (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944) has been employed to explain the media-politics dynamics in China, though only in a very few studies (Creemers 2017; Schneider 2017; Svensson 2014). While acknowledging the influence of both official media discourses and mass deliberation on individuals is certainly of relevance, this study provides an alternative perspective on China's political communication process related to foreign issues by focusing on one specific communicative dimension (or group): the online influentials in China's media sphere.

I define online influentials in the Chinese context as those sections of China's political, social, and media elite (and their institutions), who engage in civic discussions through digital platforms, and actively utilize their offline discursive power to disseminate political news and information. Online influentials represent a rising force within China's digital-networked space, and they are not limited to any specific group based on socio-political identities. Thanks to the hierarchical feature of Weibo (one of the most popular social networking sites in China) which distinguishes "verified" and "non-verified" users, we are able to identify influentials in China's cyberspace, and analyze their composition and discursive strategies in political debates. This research note has two purposes. The first is to consider who these online influentials are, with respect to foreign policy issues, by looking at the case of China-Japan relations. The second is to analyze what these influentials are saying, and particularly the extent to which they display more nationalist or conflict-oriented narratives versus more pragmatic ones.

It should be noted that this study does not discuss the *actual* influence or empowering potential of verified Weibo users, nor does it investigate their (media) *effects* on the public. Rather, through examining this often-neglected communicative dimension of online influentials, this research seeks to expand our understanding of media-politics dynamics in contemporary China, where political information flow is not characterized by a straightforward process of news production and consumption among different groups (for example, between the party organ, journalists, and the public), but instead through a content "repertoire" comprised of multiple groups. Furthermore, it provides a counter-argument to the often taken-for-granted assumption that Weibo always fosters nationalism. Rather, the results of this research note illustrate that private influentials, including public intellectuals and those from business and cultural circles, actually are divided, with some advancing more pragmatic and less nationalist discourses. This may not pertain on all or even most issues; in the conclusion I discuss likely scope conditions such as division in elite opinion or strategic efforts to quell more radical views. Nonetheless, the findings do suggest the possibility of "strategic pluralism" in the social media space, and even with respect to sensitive foreign policy issues such as Sino-Japanese relations.

#### WHY ARE VERIFIED USERS OF WEIBO SEEN AS ONLINE INFLUENTIALS?

Sino-Japanese relations were chosen as the case study for the present research because of the significance of these bilateral relations for China, as well as the continuous and vast

media/public attention they have received during the past several decades. This study collected and analyzed online posts discussing Sino-Japanese relations by verified Weibo users published between 2011 and 2017. Since it was launched in 2009, Weibo has seen explosive growth in terms of registered users and market value. Akin to a hybrid of Twitter and Facebook, it has been, and continues to be, one of the most popular SNSs in China.

As noted, because of its unique means of distinguishing between “non-verified” and “verified,” which is marked by the symbol “V” after a user’s name, Weibo provides a good case for identifying online influentials in the Chinese context (Wang, She, and Chen 2014). From its inception, Weibo has encouraged influential individuals such as celebrities, journalists, scholars, public intellectuals, and media organizations to set up Weibo accounts, while offering them the possibility of verification as a status marker and endorsement of their official credit and trustworthiness. Using the two criteria of “having a following” and “being seen as an expert,” several studies have illustrated that Weibo’s verified users are capable of exerting more influence in the online sphere than their non-verified counterparts, thereby becoming influentials in China’s digital space (e.g., Creemers 2017; Schneider 2017; Svensson 2014).

The specific mechanisms through which Weibo’s verified users gain their influence are related to the notion of information customizability. Information customizability is considered one of the most significant elements in the current and future information environment. Dylko (2015) has suggested that information customizability could be classified into two types: user-driven customization (where users take steps to adjust their information environment) and system-driven customization (where the information system analyzes the users’ browsing behavior or their online profile and customizes content based on that information without any steps being taken by the users). With regard to user-driven information customizability, Weibo users tend to subscribe to verified users and receive information from them because of their higher credibility and the more comprehensive content compared to ordinary users. With regard to system-driven customizability, Weibo sets up a “Hot Topic” category in which the latest posts of verified users are prioritized and displayed according to individual users’ searching and browsing history. Hence, through user- and system-driven information customizability, verified users’ influence is widely proliferated, while non-verified users’ posts sink into the information sea. Therefore, verified Weibo users, who enjoy the rich information resources, high public credibility, and wide online influence, become a key institution of “sense-making” in regard to various political, economic, and social issues in China.

Despite holding great “discursive” power, verified users have also come under tighter monitoring and stricter management by the Chinese state compared with the general public (Creemers 2017; Schneider 2017). The influence of big Vs in China’s digital sphere was noted from the very start by the Chinese state. The Chinese authorities implemented a series of measures to cooperate with, manage, and even censor and punish online celebrities. On August 10, 2013, the Forum of Social Responsibilities of Internet Celebrities held a CCTV television broadcast that was hosted by a number of online celebrities, including business magnate Pan Shiyi, intellectual celebrity Ji Lianhai, and essayist and popular blogger Zhou Xiaoping. In the forum, Lu Wei, the deputy head of the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of China, put forward the

seven “norms,” or so-called “baselines” (*dixian*), to which online celebrities should conform. These include respect for laws and regulations, the socialist system, the national interest, citizens’ lawful rights and interests, public order, morality, and the accuracy of information. Two weeks after the forum, a *People’s Daily* editorial, published on August 26, 2013, echoed the “baselines” statement, highlighting that big Vs must not become rumormongers. If they were viewed as disseminating content that might challenge the CCP’s legitimacy or social stability, those big Vs would face harsh punishment. On August 30, the American-Chinese businessman Charles Xue (Alias Xue Manzi), a Weibo-verified user with 12 million followers, was arrested and publicly pilloried on CCTV. While he was officially charged with patronizing a prostitute, his detention was widely seen as retaliation for his online critiques of China’s corruption and political reforms. Another case concerns the sudden censure of Hao Qun’s (Alias Murong Xuecun) Weibo account. Hao Qun is a popular novelist and critical blogger. As a best-selling Chinese author, he had 4 million followers on Weibo. When Hao launched a critique of the state of censorship in China, his Weibo account mysteriously disappeared, in May 2013. Xue’s arrest and Hao’s disappearance from Weibo are regarded as small examples of the Chinese authorities’ plan to take back control of public opinion online (Creemers 2017). Xue’s and Murong’s cases, in parallel with the “baselines” statement, illustrate that the Chinese authorities are closely monitoring Weibo-verified users—key online influentials in China’s digital sphere.

This study seeks to identify China’s online influentials, and investigate what they are saying with respect to foreign policy issues, by looking at the case of China–Japan relations, and particularly the extent to which influentials display more nationalist or conflict-oriented narratives versus more pragmatic ones. A data-scraping tool (*Jiweiku*) has been used to mine the keywords “Sino-Japanese” on Weibo. The resulting sample for this study comprises 10,850 posts which have been coded and analyzed. Further details regarding the protocol, coding process, and intercoder reliability check can be found in the supplementary data.

#### WHO ARE CHINESE’S ONLINE INFLUENTIALS IN THE DIGITAL DEBATE OF SINO-JAPANESE RELATIONS?

The findings of this research’s profile analyses reveal a diverse ecosystem that includes not only established media agencies and government agencies, but also public intellectuals, whose role and presence are quite central. In addition, governmental bodies and officials, and others in the commercial sector and cultural industries, also engage in the digital debate of Sino-Japanese relations. The results of the main variables of content analysis are summarized in [Table 1](#).

In terms of the source of online posts regarding Sino-Japanese relations, reposts with original comments form the largest group (66.69%,  $n = 7,236$ ), followed by original posts (27.54%,  $n = 2,988$ ). Reposts without original comments make up only a very small part of the sample (5.77%,  $n = 626$ ). This finding demonstrates that Weibo’s verified users have actively engaged in the digital discussion of Sino-Japanese relations by providing subjective and original analysis within China’s online sphere rather than simply using microblogging as a platform to disseminate content from offline, established news agencies.

**TABLE 1** Content analysis results of Sina Weibo's verified users' online posts on the issue of Japan and Sino-Japanese relations between 2011 and 2017 ( $n = 10,850$ )

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**Source:**

1. Original posts: 27.54%,  $n = 2,988$
2. Reposts with original comments: 66.69%,  $n = 7,236$
3. Reposts without original comments: 5.77%,  $n = 626$

**Theme:**

1. Sino-Japanese territorial dispute and other geopolitical conflicts: 21.80%,  $n = 2,365$
2. The Chinese state's policy towards Japan: 23.61%,  $n = 2,562$
3. Japan's domestic political and economic issues: 13.10%,  $n = 1,421$
4. Japan's international engagement: 11.66%,  $n = 1,265$
5. Contemporary Japanese culture and society: 10.80%,  $n = 1,172$
6. Sino-Japanese War history and war-related issues: 6.85%,  $n = 743$
7. Sino-Japanese people-to-people exchanges: 5.44%,  $n = 590$
8. Sino-Japanese governmental cooperation: 6.75%,  $n = 732$

**User's composition:**

1. Media agencies: 36.61%,  $n = 3,972$
  2. Public intellectuals (e.g., scholar, writer, and self-media operator): 31.28%,  $n = 3,394$
  3. Governmental bodies and officials: 7.00%,  $n = 760$
  4. Commercial sectors: 5.31%,  $n = 576$
  5. Cultural industry: 4.29%,  $n = 465$
  6. Other: 15.51%,  $n = 1,683$
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With regard to topic/theme, the Chinese state's policy towards Japan (23.61%,  $n = 2,562$ ) and Sino-Japanese territorial disputes and other geopolitical conflicts (21.80%,  $n = 2,365$ ) were found to be the top two Japan-related topics discussed by Weibo's verified users; these were followed by Japan's domestic political and economic issues (13.10%,  $n = 1,421$ ), Japan's international engagements (11.66%,  $n = 1,265$ ), and contemporary Japanese culture and society (10.80%,  $n = 1,172$ ). It should be noted that these are diverse debates, and that conflict-focused narratives coexist with more pragmatism-driven viewpoints that call for a more rational thinking and policy toward Japan. Moreover, while the war and war-related controversies between China and Japan have been hotly debated among Chinese ordinary netizens (Cairns and Carlson 2016), this topic has been obviously downplayed among China's online influentials, with only 6.85% ( $n = 743$ ) of the total sample mentioning it. The two themes least discussed were Sino-Japanese governmental cooperation (6.75%,  $n = 732$ ) and people-to-people exchanges between two nations (5.44%,  $n = 590$ ), illustrating that the cooperative discourses were unappealing to political, media, and societal elites.

The typology and analysis shows that the largest group of Weibo's verified users in the discussion of Sino-Japanese relations is composed of the official Weibo accounts of media agencies (36.61%,  $n = 3,972$ ), followed by public intellectuals including scholars, writers, critics, and individual media workers (31.28%,  $n = 3,394$ ), governmental bodies and officials (7.00%,  $n = 760$ ), and those from the commercial sector (5.31%,  $n = 576$ ) and cultural industry (4.29%,  $n = 465$ ). In addition, users' occupations and institutions that cannot be categorized into one of these five types have been categorized as "others," and they represent 15.51% ( $n = 1,683$ ) of the total sample. Although a previous

study has investigated the composition of Weibo's verified users by randomly choosing 300 big Vs in 2013 to determine their occupations and institutions (Svensson 2014), this research note provides a detailed explanation of the specific composition of online influentials in the digital debates around Sino-Japanese relations, based on an analysis of the user profiles and the content of 10,850 Weibo posts.

#### WHAT ARE CHINESE ONLINE INFLUENTIALS SAYING ABOUT THE ISSUE OF SINO-JAPANESE RELATIONS?

The most profound finding derived from the analysis of the Weibo posts is that China's online influentials' viewpoints on Sino-Japanese relations are not uniform; some influentials have broken with the conflict-focused discourses that have prevailed on Weibo, reflecting a competing narrative of the need for greater pragmatism towards Japan. More specifically, some private verified users adopt a "conflict lens," reposting news coverage of Sino-Japanese disputes over a series of historical and contemporary issues, as well as the Chinese government's assertive stance. They produce original commentaries and analyses condemning Japan's behavior in these bilateral relations. Concurrently, other actors emerge that exhibit a more rational perspective, considering Sino-Japanese relations from a pragmatic perspective. These include non-mainland Chinese media, public intellectuals, scholars, critics, "self-media" operators, and users from the commercial sector. In the following, I analyze Chinese online influentials' diverse voices according to their institutions and/or identities.

#### MEDIA AGENCIES

The official Weibo accounts of news organizations represent the largest component of Weibo's verified users in the digital debate on Sino-Japanese relations, making up more than a third (36.61%,  $n = 3,972$ ) of the total sample. As previous studies have suggested, in today's digital environment, news institutions and journalism continue to be central "sense-making" institutions, providing resources for societies to understand public issues (Peters and Broersma 2016). In the Chinese context, traditional media agencies have a high degree of public credibility, and they have expanded their influence in the digital space with respect to a variety of issues related to China's domestic affairs and foreign relations.

There are four distinct types of media agencies actively engaging in the digital debates around Sino-Japanese relations. These are (1) China's national party organs (e.g., *the People's Daily*); (2) China's provincial- and municipal-level news organizations (e.g., *Zhejiang Daily*); (3) China's nation-wide commercial media corporations (e.g., Sina Corp and *Caijing magazine*); and (4) Chinese language, non-mainland media institutions (e.g., Phoenix Television and *Ta Kung Pao*). However, despite being heterogeneous in terms of their ownership, profit model and base location, a shared practice of most media agencies with respect to the issue of Sino-Japanese relations on Weibo concerns their inclination towards conflict-focused discourses, and their downplaying of benign, friendly, and cooperative interactions between China and Japan.

It has been suggested that by 2015 nearly all of the Chinese traditional media agencies had established their own Weibo accounts, utilizing it as a platform to expand their

influence (Huang and Lu 2017). Some prominent examples include @ *People's Daily*, which launched in August 2012 and had 51.76 million followers; @ CCTV NEWS, which launched in November 2012 and had 49.22 million followers; and @ the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, which had 9.24 million followers by the end of 2016. The Weibo accounts of these news agencies automatically inherited the reputation, influence, and audiences of their parental bodies. In the online discussion of Sino-Japanese relations, China's national party organs' Weibo accounts also inherited the privilege of providing exclusive news and information, thus becoming a crucial information source for other media participants on Weibo. Other domestic media agencies, including local news organizations and commercial corporations, are only allowed to select and repost the official media's narratives.

It is worth noting that while most mainland Chinese news organizations are actively engaged in "going Weibo" by opening official accounts and becoming verified users, so are established news suppliers in the Greater China region. For instance, the Hong Kong-based Chinese-language news organizations Phoenix Television, *Ta Kung Pao*, and *Wen Wei Po* all launched their own Weibo accounts. Among these, *Phoenix Weekly* has been the most successful, attracting 11.38 million Weibo followers (in 2016), surpassing many of its Mainland Chinese counterparts. In another case, *Lianhe Zaobao*, a Singapore-based newspaper and the only overseas Chinese-language newspaper that can be purchased in the major cities in Mainland China, also opened a Weibo account, which attracted 1.74 million followers. These news agencies have focused their attention on a variety of China's domestic affairs and foreign policies, especially China's relations with world powers and its Asian neighbors.

As would be expected, party organs and approved media play a large role in the media space, though foreign sources have gained a foothold too. However, also not surprisingly, these foreign sources tend to be favorable to the national party's views. Media institutions abroad that were allowed to launch Weibo accounts were usually deemed by the Chinese authorities as 'friendly' toward China. This is verified by examining the users' profiles. When reporting China-Japan relations, those media agencies abroad held a perceptible bias towards China's position, reposting high-ranking Chinese officials' statements, and publishing information from pro-China foreign media (such as content from the Russian news agency), as well as inviting some pro-China columnists or scholars to comment. During significant bilateral crises, the biased stance of those media institutions abroad became even more obvious. For instance, in reporting the Sino-Japanese territorial dispute on Diaoyu Island (Senkaku in Japanese), @*Ta Kung Pao* and @*Wen Wei Po* frequently cite foreign countries' critiques of the Japanese government's nationalization practices, stressing to the domestic opposition from the Japanese government, its opposition party, civil groups, the media and ordinary people. Some representative posts included:

Japanese senior leader Hiromu Nonaka apologized to Chinese people for Japan's nationalization (of the island). He also pointed out that the Japanese authority made this wrong decision with the aim of accumulating votes. (@*Ta Kung Pao* 23/09/2012)

The US media publish "A letter to Shinzo Abe (the Japanese prime minister)," implying that Japan is a kid who asks parents' protection after fight with others. The core meaning of this letter is to warn Japan not to bring troubles for the US. (@*Wen Wei Po* 20/02/2012)

With regard to another prominent issue of bilateral relations—the war-related controversy—@ Zaobaowang, the official Weibo account of the Singapore-based *Lianhe Zaobao*, posted a comment quoting China’s Foreign Minister Wangyi, who said in a speech: “Japan is backpedaling on war-related issues” (@Zaobaowang 08/03/2016). It is notable that in this post, @Zaobaowang added a GIF showing a car that kept reversing until it fell from a terrace. In this way, @Zaobaowang showed its (implicit) support for China’s view that Japan would eventually pay the price if it continued to falsify war-related history. In general, despite occasional deviation from China’s official discourse, the posts of these media institutions abroad often provide support for, rather than challenging, the Chinese state’s stances. What distinguishes them from domestic Chinese media is that the former organizations’ Weibo accounts sometimes adopt a broader geopolitical perspective, considering the negative influence of deteriorating bilateral relations on the prosperity and stability of the Asia-Pacific region generally. Many Weibo posts touch on this theme with such statements as: “The worsening Sino-Japanese relations inflict heavy losses on Japanese business in China, as well as hurting the regional economy” (@*Ta Kung Pao* 24/08/2012) and “Chinese and Japanese navy forces will perish together if there is a war between them. Then the US will take over Asia immediately and readily” (@*Ta Kung Pao* 28/08/2012).

While most Western-based global media groups, such as the BBC and CNN, have been completely barred from entering the Weibo sphere, these non-mainland Chinese media institutions are allowed to enter the Weibo sphere, becoming alternative voices from outside China on China’s domestic politics and foreign relations. Therefore, from the perspective of information exposure to China’s micro-bloggers, and the shaping the Chinese public opinion, these non-mainland media institutions have achieved a profound discursive power expansion by becoming influentials in China’s political communication space.

#### PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS

Public intellectuals, including scholars, writers, critics, and individual media workers, represent the second largest group (31.28%,  $n = 3,394$ ) of Weibo-verified users in the digital discussion of Sino-Japanese relations. They constitute a core bloc of the influentials in China’s cyberspace as well, almost as large a presence as the media sector. Chinese intellectuals’ active engagement concerning their country’s external strategies, while within bounds, is clearly evident. Although a few well-known writers and international relations experts open Weibo accounts and actively promote their viewpoints, many previously inaudible individuals, including scholars, amateur essayists, and self-media operators, use Weibo as a platform to launch their voices, and they have achieved considerable discursive power. The online posts by these public intellectuals demonstrate a fierce competition between two contrasting propositions regarding Sino-Japanese relations, with one referring to a more ambitious, proactive, and nationalist agenda, and the other referring to a moderate and pragmatic stance (with some supporters of this viewpoint defining themselves as the “knowing Japan” group).

Public intellectuals’ Weibo posts regarding China’s stance towards Japan and its strategies in the wider international engagement vary conspicuously, reflecting contradictory elements in China’s foreign policy at the elite level. There are clear indications of



enthusiasm among some experts for more vigorous assertion in Sino-Japanese relations. Yan Xuetong, dean of Tsinghua University's Institute of Modern International Relations, Li Ao, a Chinese-Taiwanese writer and celebrity, and the military essayist and self-media operator, Keluo Liaofu (whose real name is unknown), exemplify the strong presence of nationalist perceptions on Weibo. As a high-profile expert in international relations, Yan opened his Weibo account in 2011, and collected 130,000 followers, providing in-depth analyses and explanations of a variety of China's foreign affairs. Yan, who is a strong supporter of China's strategic transformation from "keeping a low-profile" (*taoguangyanghui*) to "striving for achievement" (*fenfayouwei*), argues that "striving for achievement" was a more effective way to shape a favorable environment for China's national rejuvenation. Yan's Weibo posts regarding Japan are obviously conflict-focused and highlight the Japan-US alliance, Japan's military expansion, and Sino-Japanese territorial disputes. Yan's posts present an image of Japan as China's geopolitical rival, as well as a challenger of Asian-Pacific peace and prosperity (e.g., @Yanxuetong 02/09/2013; 24/05/2014).

As a famous Chinese-Taiwanese writer, historian, and independent politician, Li Ao is considered by many to be one of the most important modern East Asian essayists. Li Ao's strong nationalist sentiment and witty writing style have made him a popular figure among Chinese netizens (Cai 2015). Li has a verified Weibo account with the name of "Hello Li Ao," which has attracted 10.32 million followers—even more than China's most successful commercial newspaper's Weibo account. When discussing Sino-Japanese relations, Li's strong hostility toward Japan characterizes him as an assertive nationalist. For instance, Li has metaphorically suggested that in the late Qing era (between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), China was a "sex slave" of Western countries, and Japan, as a strong neighbor of China, also actively engaged in "raping" China in modern times. When commenting on contemporary international relations, Li uses the words "Japanese devils" and "America's running dog" to refer to Japan. Li frequently uses (sexual) profanities to express his indignation towards Japan and in his description Sino-Japanese relations (such as the word "rape" to refer to Japan's invasion of China). This caters to the taste of a large number of net users (Cai 2015). His posts referencing Japan have thus been widely read and re-posted on Weibo.

Unlike Yan and Li, who were already famous scholars or writers before opening their Weibo accounts, the military essayist and self-media operator Keluo Liaofu (an alias, the real name of the operator of this Weibo account is unknown to the author of this study), who represents another force of nationalist expression on the issue of Sino-Japanese relations, only became an influential public intellectual after entering the Weibo sphere. Keluo Liaofu opened his Weibo account in 2010 and has attracted 8.19 million followers—more than the majority of Chinese news agencies attracted. Keluo Liaofu's posts have a strong nationalist flavor, for example in his description of Japan as a "devil" and his suggestion that "resisting Japan should not be a passing phase" (@Keluo Liaofu 09/10/2013). Furthermore, as a military essayist, Keluo Liaofu often mentions military themes, including comparisons between China's and Japan's military strength, reflecting his firm belief that China has overtaken Japan (e.g., @Keluo Liaofu 21/08/2013; 27/07/2016).

Conflict-focused narratives and nationalist perceptions have not dominated public intellectuals' online discourses, however. The emergence of the "knowing Japan" group

(*zhiripai*) in China's digital sphere represents the other ideological trend, which calls for a more moderate, pragmatic, and forward-looking perspective on this issue. Although Sino-Japanese relations have been frequently debated in China's academic and policy fields over the past decades, the narrative of conflict has been rather uniform at the public level (Reilly 2014). In 2002, following the publication of Ma Licheng's provocative article "New Thinking on Relations with Japan," a fierce public debate emerged in China regarding the country's Japan policies. However, scholars such as Ma, who called for a more moderate and rational attitude toward Japan, were quickly labeled as traitors or "Japanophiles" (*qinripai*), and their voices became submerged.

The situation has changed more recently, with the emerging "knowing Japan" groups adopting social media as a new, contested arena in which to debate antagonisms toward Japan, and providing alternative viewpoints that receive mass critique and attention. The "knowing Japan" group, which is mainly composed of intellectuals, media professionals, scholars, researchers, and writers, distinguish themselves from the "pro-Japanese" (*qinripai*) and the "anti-Japanese" (*fanripai*) groups, and brand themselves as authentic experts on Japanese issues. They have adopted Weibo as a platform for "mini talk shows" and "mini public lectures," comprehensively introducing Japan's domestic affairs and foreign policies and expressing their opinions about considering Japan rationally and reconstructing pragmatic bilateral relations. Two representatives of the "knowing Japan" group are Jiang Feng, editor-in-chief of *Riben Xinhua Qiaobao* (Japan's overseas Chinese Newspaper), and Feng Wei, from Fudan University.

*Riben Xinhua Qiaobao* is a Japan-based newspaper that focuses its reports on Sino-Japanese relations and Japan's overseas Chinese residents. Jiang Feng launched his Weibo account during the stage of Weibo's emergence in China in September 2009. Using his Weibo account, Jiang has written numerous posts introducing Japanese history, tradition, pop culture, the fashion industry, arts, and other aspects of contemporary society, covering negative issues in Japan, including gangdom (@Jiangfeng 22/10/2014), political scandals (@Jiangfeng 12/11/2012), and the country's high suicide rate (@Jiangfeng 02/06/2016), as well as its social progress. In addition, Jiang's Weibo posts often mention his personal interactions with ordinary Japanese from the business, cultural, media, and education industries with an amiable tone. The aim of these posts is to provide a multifaceted representation of Japan and the Japanese to Chinese netizens so as to replace the deep-rooted image of Japan as the one-sided "invader."

Feng Wei is a professor of Japanese history at Fudan University with a friendly attitude towards Japan, who strongly criticizes the popular anti-Japanese sentiments in China's online sphere, arguing that, although Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe is a troublemaker, many Japanese are very kind and conscientious. Since Feng's posts usually provoke heated debate on Weibo, some microbloggers have labeled him "China's traitor" or "Japanophile." Despite often being attacked by netizens with a torrent of abuse, Feng has not closed his Weibo account or become silent. In contrast, he acts as a very active microblogger, posting about five daily microblogs on Japan and Sino-Japanese relations. Two Weibo posts express not only Feng Wei's key views on Japan, but also those of all the "knowing Japan" groups:

A deep, comprehensive understanding of Japan is the precondition for overtaking Japan.  
(@Fudan University Fengwei 29/07/2016)

Japan has many people and things which are worth loving but also many people and things worth hating. However, no matter love or hate, a real and comprehensive understanding is the precondition. (@Fudan University Fengwei 22/04/2017)

In addition to Jiang and Feng, some ordinary individuals who are amateur critics also use Weibo to launch their viewpoints and attract a mass of followers. Some prominent players include @Kelisituofu Jin, @Yangguan Riben, @Chahaer Xuehui. The “knowing Japan” group of intellectuals has been able to use Weibo as a low-threshold and effective platform to express alternative viewpoints, making them (controversial) influentials in China's digital media space. In general, analysis of public intellectuals' online discussion illustrates that it would be wrong to assume there is unanimity among China's intelligentsia regarding Sino-Japanese relations. Rather, political deliberation is taking place at both social and elite levels, and multiple viewpoints co-exist and compete in a digitally facilitated, animated domestic debate.

At the same time, public intellectuals' online discussions are by no means free from government censorship. While it has been demonstrated that the strong sentiments and rational critiques of ordinary netizens regarding the Chinese state have been allowed to be expressed in the online sphere as long as they do not call for rebellious collective actions (MacKinnon 2011), such leniency is not given to public intellectuals (Creemers 2017; Schneider 2017). Since they enjoy more discursive power and can exert more influence on public opinions, the “bottom line” has been significantly raised for them, and it is not uncommon for their negative comments regarding the authorities to disappear. In this way, the official agenda remains fundamentally unchallenged.

#### *GOVERNMENT BODIES AND OFFICIALS, AND CULTURAL AND BUSINESS SECTORS*

Government bodies and officials, as well as those in the business and cultural sectors, represent relatively very small percentage of the verified Weibo users (7%,  $n = 760$ ; 5.3%,  $n = 576$ ; and 4.29%,  $n = 465$ , respectively). As authoritative and authentic information sources, these governmental bodies and officials are online influentials by default (Schlaeger and Jiang 2014). However, their official accounts show self-restraint with respect to their discursive power in the digital field. For example, their Weibo posts reflect a low-key and cautious stance with respect to discussing Sino-Japanese relations, and they tend to repost the Chinese government's official condemnations of Japan and its assertive stance on bilateral relations rather than providing original commentaries or news. Analysis also reveals that the major Weibo accounts of the government bodies and officials that engage in digital debates on Sino-Japanese relations are at the local level.

Government departments and officials in the legal system are relatively active participants on Weibo. Some courts, procuratorates, and public security bureaus register their Weibo accounts, and post and repost news and comments on China's domestic and foreign affairs, including Sino-Japanese relations (Zheng and Zheng 2014). Some examples are @Yucheng public security (Yucheng is a county-level city in Shandong province), @Qingdao public security (Qingdao is also a city in Shandong province), and @Cool breeze Kaifeng discipline inspection commission (Kaifeng is a city in Henan province). However, the content analysis shows that the majority of the government sectors' Weibo accounts are quite inactive on the subject of Sino-Japanese relations in

general (with less than three posts per year on average), but become enthusiastic when reposting the statements of Chinese officials and spokespersons' speeches regarding Japan during China's Two Sessions (the annual plenary sessions of the two organizations that make national-level political decisions). This demonstrates that many government departments and officials use their Weibo accounts to show "political correctness" and support of the central government's attitudes and policies, rather than to engage in real, effective political discussions (Schlaeger and Jiang 2014).

In addition, the content analysis reveals that the majority of governmental and official Weibo accounts that post content on Japan are at the local level. City-level accounts make up 68% ( $n = 517$ ) of the government-related Weibo accounts, followed by provincial- (16%,  $n = 122$ ), county- (9%,  $n = 68$ ), and central- (7%,  $n = 53$ ) level accounts. The central-level government sector that publishes information on Japan and Sino-Japanese relations on Weibo mainly focuses on the official Weibo account of the Public Diplomacy Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, @ Waijiao Xiaolingtong. Because Weibo posts and comments published by central governmental departments and high-level officials are considered to be representative of the state's stance, they are very cautious in releasing significant and sensitive foreign affairs news compared to their local level counterparts (also see Zheng 2013). However, despite being relatively active actors, the local-level government officials tend to use Weibo to repost the central government's statements regarding Japan so as to remain politically correct.

Those from commercial circles and the cultural industry (including the publishing, tourism, and education abroad industries) represent two other small components of Weibo's verified users in the discussion of Sino-Japanese relations. Analysis also revealed that those from the cultural and business sectors usually hold a more pragmatic and rational attitude on this issue, considering bilateral relations from the perspective of investigating the impact of China-Japan relations on their own field. For instance, one Weibo post from the CEO of an environmental technology company noted:

When Sino-Japanese relations went bad, China started to rethink its policy on rare earth exports. Thanks for the Abe administration's tough stance, otherwise China would never come to its senses and realize the significance of scarce resources. It is time to change China's attitude and policy on it. (Weibo-verified user from an environmental technology company 2016)

Furthermore, online discussions among cultural and commercial circles regarding Sino-Japanese relations reflect the often-cited view of "Hot economics and cold politics" (*zhengleng jingre*). In the more-than-40 years since the two nations normalized their diplomatic relations in 1978, China and Japan have become increasingly interdependent, particularly in the fields of economy, trade, and cultural exchange (Reilly 2014). The fluctuation of bilateral relations impact not only politician's policies but also a variety of industries and those who work in them. For some in the Chinese cultural and commercial sectors that have engagements with Japan, the country might represent a market of opportunities rather than a politically sensitive neighboring country that has had a long-term feud with China (Fisman et al. 2014). Therefore, they often hold a more pragmatic and moderate perception of Japan and believe that stable bilateral relations are beneficial to China and to themselves. Nevertheless, considering the anti-Japanese sentiment prevailing in China's cyberspace, posting counter-mainstream discourses, such as calling

for reconciliation and cooperation between the two governments, is an unwise practice. Therefore, those from the business and cultural sectors refrain from engaging in political discussion, focusing on less sensitive themes like economy, culture, and society. Some typical posts from the cultural and business sectors include:

The need for a mutual understanding between the people of China and Japan is urgent. The industry of study abroad in Japan would form a bridge to Sino-Japanese friendship in the current difficulties. (Weibo-verified user from an education abroad company 2014)

The disagreement between Chinese and Japanese governments should not affect the people-to-people exchange. Chinese tourists still are enthusiastic in travelling to Japan, and vice versa. (Weibo-verified user from a tourist company 2015)

In general, the cultural and business sectors, once inconsequential players in China's political communication space (Schneider 2017), still keep a low profile in the discussion of Sino-Japanese relations on Weibo. They post comments on this issue, but from a narrow, industrial-focused perspective, without running counter to the overwhelming public sentiment or challenging the key policies of China's central government.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

By analyzing the profiles and viewpoints of verified users' Weibo posts, this research has identified some of the influentials in China's digital sphere, and examined their discussion posts on the issue of Sino-Japanese foreign relations. The results reveal a diverse ecosystem that includes not only established media and government agencies, but also public intellectuals, whose role is quite central. An analysis of the content of posts finds private influentials' viewpoints on Sino-Japanese relations are similarly diverse. Some have broken with the conflict-focused discourses that have prevailed on Weibo, reflecting a competing narrative of the need for greater pragmatism towards Japan. The findings call into question the argument that social media necessarily trends toward greater nationalism.

The state's strict censorship has largely diminished the opportunity for fundamentally challenging voices such as criticism of the socialist system or challenging the legitimacy of the CCP. Nonetheless, some leeway and opportunities for private influentials can be expected under certain conditions. First, there may be a greater chance of expression of opinion when elite government and party opinion are also divided. This may be the case with respect to Sino-Japanese relations. Such pluralism in China's cyberspace might also be due to strategic considerations on the part of government and party elites. The analysis here covers a period when Sino-Japanese relations had continuously deteriorated, and the Chinese state may have tolerated diverse voices to balance out more extreme nationalist views. Therefore, this study suggests strong scope conditions to the claim of a diverse media landscape. If we look at more sensitive topics, such as Tibet or human rights issues, we are unlikely to find the same outcome.

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## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2019.27>.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares none.

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