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BATTLE LINES IN THE CHINESE BLOGOSPHERE

KEYWORD CONTROL AS A TACTIC
IN MANAGING MASS INCIDENTS



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of keyword control, in other words the blocking and unblocking of search keywords, on Sina's popular microblog platform during media campaigns over politically sensitive issues in China. The author examines media campaigns in Chinese newspapers, television, microblogs and other media forms during two separate large-scale protests in December of 2011 in Guangdong province, one in the village of Wukan and the other in the town of Haimen. This paper uses these case studies to examine which acts of keyword control might be part of a set of coordinated directives in a broader media campaign over a particular politically sensitive issue. Observations based on these case studies suggest that changes in keyword control on microblogs might be the earliest detectable sign of shifts in the government's position in their response to politically sensitive issues.

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1. INTRODUCTION¹

1.1 Civil unrest and the “guerilla war for the web”

Civil unrest is a major concern for the government of China, a country where hundreds of instances of civil unrest occur every day.² These are commonly referred to as “mass incidents,”³ a very broad term used in China to describe significant instances of civil unrest or collective protest action. While significant unrest has its own implications for the ruling Chinese Communist Party, volatility in China also has immense repercussions for the global political economy. Therefore, understanding the changing dynamics of civil unrest in China is not only important for the advancement of human rights and freedoms, but also for understanding the character of China’s rise on the global stage.

The Chinese government has invested vast resources into controlling its population. This year, spending on domestic security will exceed defense spending for the third straight year, which is undoubtedly tied to concerns over civil unrest.⁴ These efforts are in part funneled into increasing the police and paramilitary forces, jails and other arms of the state security apparatus, but rising expenditures are directly tied to the control over the media, and in particular, online social media.⁵

Control over the media as a whole, both traditional sources like television and newspapers as well as online news and social media, is a crucial tool for the Chinese government when responding to a broad range of politically sensitive issues, including civilian protests, inner-party power struggles, and other controversial matters. This provides the government with a number of possibilities for response, including framing the sensitive issues in their favor or keeping media outlets silent. In this paper, the strategic coupling of repression and propaganda via media outlets in response to politically sensitive issues will be referred to as a “media control campaign”.

In recent years, Chinese microblogs – social media platforms similar to Twitter – have opened up a new space for discussion and dissent in Chinese society. Consequently, they have also become a new battle ground for control over the media. When protests flare up in the streets, they can also ignite corresponding conflicts online between Chinese netizens – internet-using citizens – and institutions of online media control. Though

1 The author would like to thank those people whose help made this paper possible: to the publication and administration staff for facilitating research at FIIA, to FIIA researcher Bart Gaens, Global Security Program Director Mika Altola, and FIIA director Teija Tiilikainen for their invaluable comments, and finally to FIIA researchers and China scholars Jyrki Kallio and Mikael Mattlin for their comments, suggestions and guidance on this paper, and for sharing their knowledge with me during my time at FIIA.

2 Sun Liping, Tsinghua University professor of sociology cites estimations of over 180,000 mass incidents in 2010. This amounts to an average of nearly 500 incidents per day. These are the latest available estimates of mass incidents, which have risen steadily since the mid-90s. There has been no sign of significant decline in recent years. Sun Liping, ‘China’s Challenge: Social Disorder’, in *Economic Observer*, 9 May 2011, viewed on 19 May 2012, <http://www.eeo.com.cn/ens/feature/2011/05/09/200868.shtml>

3 群体事件

4 ‘China Raising 2012 Defense Spending To Cope With Unfriendly “Neighborhood”’, in *Bloomberg News*, 5 March 2012, viewed 28 June 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-03-04/china-says-defense-spending-will-increase-11-2-to-106-4-billion-in-2012.html>

5 Leslie Hook, ‘Beijing raises spending on internal security’, in *Financial Times*, 6 March 2011, viewed on 28 June 2012, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/f70936b0-4811-11e0-b323-00144feab49a.html#axzz1z66lBkfh>

microblogs reflect conflicts on the ground, cyberspace has in itself become part of the front lines of conflict between Chinese citizens and their government, in what some have called China's "guerrilla war for the web".⁶

This paper examines the media control campaigns around two separate instances of civil unrest that occurred in Guangdong province in December 2011, one in the village of Wukan in Shanwei prefecture and the other in the town of Haimen in Shantou prefecture. This study places particular emphasis on the role of the blocking and unblocking of keywords related to the protests in Chinese microblogs, and their relationship to the broader media campaign. The findings offer revealing insights into the role of microblogs in government media control and the strategies of government actors in response to politically sensitive issues.

1.2 Wukan and Haimen

Tensions had been high for months in the village of Wukan in Guangdong province after public farmland was sold to a private development firm in an illegal land grab by the local government. After months of petitions and protests, tensions reached new heights when one captured protest leader, Xue Jinbo, died in police custody of suspicious causes. The situation took a rare turn as the outraged citizens of Wukan drove out Communist party officials from the village. The story caught the attention of international media outlets as an 11-day stand-off began between villagers and the local prefectural government. In the last days of the stand-off, the Chinese government had instituted a nationwide "blackout" on what had become known as the "Wukan incident". Chinese newspapers and television, who had been reporting on Wukan, were barred from releasing news related to the issue. Local government officials remained opposed to protest leaders and their demands, while protest leaders and villagers vowed to march on a local government building. When protesters and the local government seemed bound to clash in a bloody conflict, the blackout was broken with a final offer from the local government. The offer failed to meet the conditions of the protest leaders, and when there appeared little hope for a resolution, the Guangdong provincial government, headed by Provincial Party Secretary Wang Yang, stepped in to mediate the situation. Wang is thought to be vying for promotion to one of seven seats in the Central Politburo Standing Committee that will be filled in the central government leadership transition in November 2012. In the face of such a high-profile incident, Wang made a final offer to Wukan protesters in an attempt to simultaneously resolve the situation and maximize his political capital in his bid for the standing committee.

On the very day the Guangdong provincial government offered to mediate the Wukan incident, another large-scale protest had broken out elsewhere in the province in the town of Haimen, just 140 kilometers from Wukan. In an unrelated protest, townspeople stormed a government building and blocked a stretch of highway, objecting to local government plans to build a second coal-fired electric power plant in their town, already plagued by pollution from the existing coal-fired plant. As provincial officials, brokering an end to the Wukan incident, called for renewed efforts to respect the interests of citizens, protesters and police clashed in Haimen while local state media conducted

6 David Bandurski, "China's guerrilla war for the Web," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, volume 171, number 6, 2008.

a concerted campaign against the Haimen protesters. Negotiations with the local prefectural government ended in the temporarily suspension of the construction project.

Users of the wildly popular microblogging platform hosted by Sina, China's largest internet media website,⁷ who were eager to investigate and discuss these protests were met with a variety of control measures, ranging from the deletion of posts regarding the protests to the blocking of search results for keywords like "Wukan" or "Haimen". The latter tactic, which involves both the blocking and unblocking of keywords related to politically sensitive issues, is the particular method of microblog control examined in this paper.

1.3 Aims of this paper

This paper seeks to explain the blocking and unblocking of search keywords on the popular Chinese microblog platform hosted by Sina over politically sensitive issues in China. It builds the case that many of these blockings and unblockings, together called "keyword control", are the result of government directives during media control campaigns.

Though there is strong evidence that keyword control is often the result of government directives, one cannot definitively say that all keyword control is the result of directives. Lack of transparency at Sina and in the Chinese government makes it difficult to fully understand the motivations and mechanisms behind Sina's keyword control. Evidence, including quotes from industry insiders, prior research on Chinese internet controls, and limited knowledge of media control institutions, shows an extremely close relationship between Sina's staff and government actors, keeping contact on a daily basis regarding how to handle politically sensitive issues. By comparing the timing of keyword control with media releases from newspaper, television and other news sources that are explicitly the result of government directives, we may build a strong case that an instance of keyword control may be part of a set of coordinated directives used in a media control campaign.

1.4 Technical notes

It is important to first clarify a few key concepts. The term "local government" is used in a variety of ways in both Chinese and foreign media, which could technically range from the province-level government down to the village level committees and party organizations. Within China, the political environment has, to an extent, allowed political criticism on issues like corruption when it is directed at "local governments", while criticism of the central government remains taboo. When a group of citizens comes into direct conflict with a particular level of government, the citizens will generally appeal to the subsequently higher level of government for help. In general, the local government will mean the level of government that is in conflict with protesting citizens. For Wukan, this ranged from their village committee to the Shanwei prefecture, one level below the Guangdong provincial government. Citizens in the town of Haimen

⁷ 'Sina, China's largest internet portal, swings to loss', via BBC, 16 May 2012, viewed on 18 June 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-18081950>

Though in some places in China certain levels of the government hierarchy are not used or not applicable, the following general hierarchy of government levels is important to bear in mind for the purposes of this paper, starting with the lowest: village (村级), township (乡级), county (县级), prefecture (地级), province (省级), and central (中央). The village of Wukan (乌坎村) is located in the Donghai township-level subdistrict (东海街道) of Lufeng county (陆丰市) of Shanwei prefecture (汕尾市) of Guangdong province (广东省). Haimen, also in Guangdong province, is located around 140 kilometers east of Wukan. Haimen (海门镇) is on the township level, located in the county level district of Chaoyang (潮阳区) in Shantou prefecture (汕头市).

stormed their local government building, and were in conflict with their prefectural government in Shantou.

Generally speaking, this paper is concerned with what most people simply call “censorship”, or the policing of various types media for political purposes. The aspect of microblogs that I have chosen to study is the blocking and unblocking of search keywords. The term censorship is problematic because it generally refers to deletion or blocking, and does not necessarily imply the “uncensoring” of material. Instead, this paper uses the term “media control” to refer to state power used in a broad, coordinated campaign to use the media and the internet as a political tool.

Though my prime interest lies in keyword control, there are many other types of control over microblogs. Sina’s microblogs, and other blogging platforms, are subject to a variety of control measures, including the blocking and/or deleting of posts, the deleting of entire accounts, blocking the comment feature,⁸ or restricting access by requiring users to register with their true name and social security number.⁹ These methods of microblog control are also important, and are often part of media control campaigns, but they are beyond the scope of this paper.

I have examined many types of media beyond microblogs, including copies of print newspapers, online newspapers, and internet television clips. Despite the fact that they are in digital form, for the sake of this paper I will refer to newspapers, television and the like as “traditional media”. This term is generally contrasted by the term “new media”, which includes blogging platforms and social media that have become popular worldwide.

Microblogs have become an integral part of Chinese internet culture, and until very recently, Sina’s microblogging platform has been unrivaled as the most popular provider in China. In English-language media, Chinese microblogs are often referred to by the romanization of the Chinese term for microblog, *weibo* (微博), however, I have chosen to simply use the term microblogs. Also, when English-language media refer to Chinese

8 This method was used in early April 2012, when the comment feature was blocked for several days. Cf. Michael Bristow, “China micro-blog comments back after rumor “clean up””, via *BBC News*, 3 April 2012, viewed 5 April 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-19196140>

9 Often referred to as “real name registration”, 实名制.

microblogs, they often tacitly imply Sina's microblog platform because of its dominance. Though other platforms, including Tencent QQ, are of growing importance I have focused specifically on Sina.

The remainder of this paper is divided into five parts. The next section begins with a short overview of media control in China, control over microblogs and keyword control. The following section covers the Wukan incident and the media campaign surrounding it, and offers some frameworks for understanding the political dynamics of the response to mass incidents. The next section offers an analysis of the media campaign over the Haimen incident, following the same logic of the analysis of the Wukan incidents. The subsequent section offers an analysis with a discussion, covering the aftermath of the Wukan and Haimen incidents, other significant recent media campaigns over politically sensitive issues, and questions about the current research paradigm of online media control in China. The paper concludes with a brief distillation of the findings.

2. MEDIA CONTROL, MICROBLOGS AND KEYWORD CONTROL

2.1 Brief overview of media control in China

The Chinese government exerts great control over all realms of Chinese media. According to Freedom House, who ranks China's press as "not free", Chinese authorities keep a "tight grip" on both traditional and online media.¹⁰ Under China's system of one-party rule, the institutions of control mix both party and state elements. For example, the Central Propaganda Department of the Communist Party maintains direct authority over the media with respect to politically sensitive issues.¹¹ In terms of state organizations, a wide array of ministries and other institutions regulate various areas of the media, including the ministries of the State Council like the General Administration of Press and Publication, responsible for the regulation of all print media in China.¹²

A myriad of institutions have claimed some domain of internet regulation, each with vague, overlapping, and possibly conflicting, interests.¹³ The vast and fragmented nature of the highest levels of the system does not, however, inhibit its ability to conduct effective, coordinated media campaigns.

State-controlled media, including newspapers, television and state news websites, respond to state directives – orders that could entail either running the official story or maintaining silence on a particular issue. In the case of Wukan, state newspapers and television released government statements and propaganda as protests escalated. Chinese news outlets eventually went into a "blackout" on Wukan, where news outlets did not report on the issue for four days.¹⁴ With the exception of a few foreign journalists sneaking in and out of the village during the blackout, one of the only sources of information accessible to Chinese citizens and foreign observers were China's microblogs.

It is sometimes difficult to say exactly how directives work – who makes them, when, and how they are transmitted. These questions, however, will help us to explore the role that microblog control plays in state media campaigns in general.

10 'Freedom of the Press 2011: China', in [freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org), viewed on 17 April 2012, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2011/china>

11 Ibid.

12 Ray Furlong, "London Book Fair: Row over China delegates", in *BBC News*, 20 March 2012, via <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-17449472>

13 Michael Wines, "China Creates New Agency for Patrolling the Internet", *The New York Times*, 4 May 2011, viewed on 18 April 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/05/world/asia/05china.html?_r=1.

14 I have counted the blackout as lasting from the evening of December 15th, when the last news piece regarding Wukan was published, to the late evening of December 19th, when the first new piece of news was published. The last known news article published in the mainland related to Wukan occurred on the morning of December 15th, 2011 and ended just before midnight on the evening of December 19th when the Shanwei Prefectural government made a final offer to Wukan residents. The International Federation of Journalists claims that the blackout began on December 15th when the *Global Times*, an official paper of the Communist Party, reported on Wukan in its English-language version while no content regarding could be found on its Chinese-language version.

2.2 Microblog control in China

Microblogs are Chinese social media networks similar to Twitter and Facebook, both of which are officially blocked in China. Users post and share messages, pictures and video online, using not only desktop computers but also cell phones and mobile devices. Chinese netizens amount to almost 40% of its population of 1.3 billion, and over half of netizens use microblogs, according to state sources.¹⁵ With 247 million microblog users, China now has more microblog users than any other country.¹⁶ In recent years, Sina's has been China's most popular microblogging platform, only recently surpassed by Tencent in number of users.¹⁷

The advent of microblogs has posed new challenges for state media control efforts. Internet censorship is conducted by complex network of government and party institutions as well as the media organizations themselves who are required by law to police their own content.¹⁸ Mystery surrounds the institutional structures, division of labor and responsibility of microblog control. In the words of one prominent Chinese blogger, Wen Yunchao, "No one knows how the system works. We only see the results."¹⁹ Nevertheless, it is important to lay out an educated impression of what we may know, and may not know, about the system.

Both foreign and domestic internet companies in China, from search engines to social media sites, are legally bound to comply with government media control initiatives as an explicit condition of their state licenses.²⁰ To quote Google's company blog after their famous falling out with the Chinese government in 2010, "self-censorship is a non-negotiable legal requirement."²¹

Furthermore, past research has shown that certain aspects of control over microblogs are "decentralized";²² that is to say, much of the work of media control is delegated out to internet companies themselves rather than being done exclusively by state and party organs. Companies like Sina employ both human and automated methods of control. Some estimates say that Sina employs under 100 people to police its content while other

15 'China has most microbloggers: report', in *China Daily*, 1 October 2012, viewed on 2 October 2012, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-10/01/content_15794819.htm.

16 Ibid.

17 Ginger Huang, 'A Reckoning for Weibo', via *The World of Chinese*, 16 March 2012, viewed on 20 May 2012, <http://www.theworldofchinese.com/2012/03/d-day-for-real-name-registration-on-weibo-arrives/>

18 Min Jiang, 'Internet Companies in China: Dancing between the Party Line and the Bottom Line', in *Asia Visions*, 30 January 2012, Vol. 47. Available here: <http://www.ifri.org/?page=contribution-detail&id=6990>

19 Tania Branigan, 'Google row: China's army of censors battles to defeat the internet', in *The Guardian*, 23 March 2010, viewed on 10 May 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2010/mar/23/google-hong-kong-china-censorship>.

20 Min Jiang, 'Internet Companies in China: Dancing between the Party Line and the Bottom Line', in *Asia Visions*, 30 January 2012, Vol. 47. Available here: <http://www.ifri.org/?page=contribution-detail&id=6990>

21 Ibid.

22 Rebecca MacKinnon, 'China's Censorship 2.0: How companies censor bloggers', in *First Monday*, Volume 14, Number 2, 2 February 2009 <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/rt/prINTERfriendly/2378/2089>

estimates are as high as 1,000.²³ Many internet companies, including microblog hosts like Tencent and Sina, also use technology to filter and flag content.²⁴

The Chinese government also reserves the right to shut down China's internet companies at their own discretion. In the past, the state has shut down microblog platforms when they became a dangerous political liability. In the summer of 2009, Chinese authorities closed down China's first major microblogging platform, Fanfou.com, for "technical maintenance" in the days leading up to the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen square incident.²⁵ It was eventually reopened over a year later, but by that time Sina's microblog platform had become the most popular microblogging site in China.

Sina has learned from the short history of its industry. During the uprisings in Arab world in the spring of 2011, also known as the "Arab Spring" or "Jasmine Revolution", the state increased its media control prerogatives. Sina acted swiftly and decisively, blocking the keyword "jasmine" and prohibiting users from forwarding posts or posting pictures. One popular Chinese blogger, Hong Bo, believes that Sina proved its ability to cooperate with state media control objectives during these tense times.²⁶ Indeed, Sina's editor Chen Tong provided an interesting quote in the months that followed the clampdown over the Jasmine Revolution, proclaiming that "there is zero possibility that Sina Weibo will be shut down within 20 years."²⁷

A central question of this paper asks which changes in microblog control, like instances of keyword control, are the result of state directives. Sina must respond to directives, but a picture of how directives work – who gives them, how they are transmitted, etc. – can only be pieced together through bits of insider information and speculations about the indistinct and overlapping responsibilities of institutions.

At the highest level of internet control in China, party and state elements both claim some jurisdiction. The Central Propaganda Department is an extremely important party organ of internet monitoring and control together with the Information Office of the State Council on the state side, which claims responsibility for internet regulation. These

23 "Most sites depend on both mechanised and human observation. Filtering software rejects posts outright or flags them up for further attention, but humans are essential to catch veiled references and check photographs, for example. Sources suggest a huge portal – such as Sina, which runs not only news, but a microblog service and discussion forums – could employ anywhere between 20 and 100 censors." Tania Branigan, 'Google row: China's army of censors battles to defeat the internet', in *The Guardian*, 23 March 2010, viewed on 10 May 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2010/mar/23/google-hong-kong-china-censorship>.

"Sina Weibo, China's most popular Twitter-like microblogging service, is believed to employ approximately 1,000 people to monitor and censor users. The CEO of Tencent, another Internet company, has said publicly that his company is working to develop new technologies and methods to better censor and monitor users." Rebecca MacKinnon, 'Promoting Global Internet Freedom', in New America Foundation, 8 December 2011, http://newamerica.net/publications/resources/2011/testimony_of_rebecca_mackinnon_to_the_house_subcommittee_on_africa_globa

24 Ibid.

25 Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net 2011".

26 Sky Canaves, former *Wall Street Journal* reporter and current lecturer at the University of Hong Kong. Sky Canaves, 'What Are You Allowed to Say on China's Social Networks?', in *Spectrum*, IEEE, June 2011, viewed on 10 May 2012, <http://spectrum.ieee.org/telecom/internet/what-are-you-allowed-to-say-on-chinas-social-networks/2>.

27 Ibid.

institutions have their respective offices at lower levels of government, probably at least to the prefecture-level, who police news-related media.²⁸

Despite the unclear picture of government institutions, state-side institutions are in constant contact with Sina and other internet companies. The editor of Sina's microblog, Chen Tong, once spoke briefly about the "headaches" caused by government directives:

"...daily meetings to discuss the latest government orders listing new topics and sensitive keywords that must either be monitored or deleted depending on the level of sensitivity; and finally, systems through which both editors and users are constantly reporting problematic content and bringing it to the attention of company censors."²⁹

It seems evident that there is a great deal of cooperation between the government and microblog hosting companies, including directives. David Bandurski, researcher at Hong Kong University's China Media Project, qualifies this notion, saying that the government "can't completely lord [media control initiatives] over commercial sites".³⁰ In his words, there is a certain "negotiation" process, where both sides consider the profitability of firms, as party leaders still want them to develop.³¹

As to who contacts Sina with directives, one unnamed industry insider jokingly complained about giving out business cards, because "pretty much every government office - national, provincial, city level - will try to contact you if they have your number."³² Major internet companies like Sina are said to be contacted with directives at least ten times a week, mainly through informal methods, including phone calls, text messages, or even through online chat services.³³

Some have suggested that the state has employed more elaborate means of media control and propaganda in recent years. The advent of government-paid bloggers, hundreds of thousands of citizens paid to comment in the government's favor, have demonstrated an impressive ability to change the direction of online conversations. Most commentators are civilian, though the Ministry of Information requires that certain "priority" websites have their own in-house team of commentators. Their main role is to "crank up the 'noise' and drown out progressive and diverse voices on China's internet." Though their role as a propaganda mechanism is not examined in this paper, it has been suggested that

28 Tania Branigan, 'Google row: China's army of censors battles to defeat the internet', in *The Guardian*, 23 March 2010, viewed on 10 May 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2010/mar/23/google-hong-kong-china-censorship>.

29 Rebecca MacKinnon, 'Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission: "China's Information Control Practices and the Implications for the United States"', 30 June 2010, http://rconversation.blogs.com/files/rm_uscc_final.pdf

30 This quote was taken from an interview of David Bandurski by the editor of the Far Eastern Economic Review. The video is available online here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZpomfqB3QVY>

31 David Bandurski, "China's guerrilla war for the Web," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, volume 171, number 6, 2008.

32 Tania Branigan, 'Google row: China's army of censors battles to defeat the internet', in *The Guardian*, 23 March 2010, viewed on 10 May 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2010/mar/23/google-hong-kong-china-censorship>.

33 Ibid.

these paid commentators may even report dangerous content to authorities, which may lead contribute to keyword control and other microblog control measures.³⁴

2.3 Keyword Control on Sina's Microblog Platform

Keyword control is the blocking and unblocking of keywords in the search function of a website, preventing the user from finding related content. For example, searching Chinese the term “strike” (罢工) in the search function of Sina's microblog platform returns a message stating “according to related laws, legislation and policies, search results for ‘strike’ could not be displayed”³⁵, a phrase which indicates that a keyword is too sensitive and has been blocked. Sina maintains its own shortlist of politically sensitive blocked search terms.³⁶ There is a body of consistently blocked terms that are notoriously politically sensitive. However, Sina also blocks and unblocks relevant politically sensitive keywords as events unfold.

Past research of Chinese internet companies has touched upon keyword control and the body of blocked keywords. Compared to this paper, those studies have one key methodological difference. In the past, studies used politically sensitive terms to compare blocking practices between various Chinese websites, including search engines like Google and Baidu and blogging platforms like Sina.³⁷ Researchers drew up a list of notorious politically sensitive subjects, selecting keywords like “Falungong”, “June 4th” (regarding the Tiananmen Square incident), “human rights”, etc., and tested how different websites block content with respect to these keywords.³⁸ These studies have observed the existence of keyword control, but they have not explored how keyword control works.

34 David Bandurski, “China's guerrilla war for the Web,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, volume 171, number 6, 2008.

35 “根据相关法律法规和政策,“罢工”搜索结果未予显示”。

36 Rebecca MacKinnon, ‘Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission: “China's Information Control Practices and the Implications for the United States”’, 30 June 2010, http://rconversation.blogs.com/files/rm_uscc_final.pdf

37 One study compared blocking practices between Google, Microsoft, Yahoo!, and Baidu (a Chinese search engine), and found a great deal of variation not only between the blocking practices between sites, but also in the blocking and unblocking of sensitive search content over time. Villeneuve's study did not actually use keywords, but searched the domain names of certain news websites that often run sensitive content. This research method is quite different from testing keyword control on microblog platforms, but it is one of the only similar studies available. In the past, much more attention has been paid to blocking and filtering practices of search engines in China. This particular study is also from several years ago, before microblog platforms, and their media control practices, had reached their current state of maturity. Nart Villeneuve, ‘Search Monitor Project: Toward a Measure of Transparency’, Citizen Lab Occasional Paper, June 2008, viewed 20 May 2012, available here: <http://citizenlab.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/nartv-searchmonitor.pdf>

A study done by Rebecca MacKinnon compared post-blocking practices according to sensitive content across several blogging platforms, including Sina. This study is much more recent and similar in nature to this paper, but does not track the blocking and unblocking of keywords in the search function of blogging platforms, only the blocking and/or deletion of sensitive posts, possibly according to sensitive keywords. Rebecca MacKinnon, ‘China's Censorship 2.0: How companies censor bloggers’, in *First Monday*, Volume 14, Number 2, 2 February 2009 <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/rt/prINTERfriendly/2378/2089>

38 Ibid.

The case studies in this paper seek to explain keyword control as events unfold, in the context of a particular state media campaign. By comparing the timing of blocking and unblocking of keywords to the release of official statements in state media, we may be able to infer the set coordinated directives to an array of media institutions. The unblocking of search keywords is not uncommon. Blocked terms are often unblocked within days or weeks of their disappearance.³⁹

One can only build a strong case for, rather than unequivocally prove, the presence of directives and attempt to show connections. Another shortcoming is the lack of extremely precise data. Keyword control on microblogs can change rapidly and without notice; much of the data on keyword control is produced by interested observers and organizations who can only report keyword control as they experience it. This has produced a certain grey area around the timing of important occurrences of keyword control. Within this grey area, however, there is room for some interesting speculations and future investigations. The results of this study suggest that certain cases of keyword blocking and unblocking may have occurred just before the release of critical official statements made via other media institutions such as state newspapers. If both the instance of keyword control and the instance, or instances, of control over other media are part of the same set of directives, then any instance of keyword control could be the first sign of a set of directives, indicating shifts in the government's position regarding politically sensitive issues.

Some instances of keyword control may very well be the result of Sina's own internal decisions. However, one cannot ignore the evidence of daily directives from state-side actors to Sina, suggesting the two work together closely regarding politically sensitive issues.

Understanding keyword control requires understanding the broader media campaign around politically sensitive issues; furthermore, understanding the media campaign requires understanding the political dynamics of the individual issue. The following sections will outline the events of Wukan and Haimen, taking into account the actions of protesters and government officials, and comparing state media campaign to the acts of keyword control on Sina's microblogs.

39 The *China Digital Times* database of blocked keywords, discussed more later, sometimes notes when terms are unblocked, if volunteers have retested previously blocked keywords.

3. THE WUKAN INCIDENT

3.1 Outline of the events of Wukan

Major protests by Wukan villagers originally occurred in September when the village government sold Wukan village-owned public farmland to private property developers for \$156 million while giving meager compensation to residents.⁴⁰ As is common in China, when residents felt they could not resolve their conflict with their most local level of government, they appealed to a higher level. Wukan residents petitioned Lufeng county level officials to no avail, leading to riots, property damage, intense police violence and arrests.⁴¹ In response, county-level officials asked the villagers of Wukan to independently elect a group of 13 representatives to commence further negotiations with officials.⁴²

On November 21st, villagers began three days of protest, both striking in the village and staging demonstrations at the county government hall in Lufeng. Shanwei prefecture, the level of government above Lufeng country, now stood beside the county and assumed joint responsibility for addressing the case. Strong-arm tactics were used at the county government hall, though no major clashes broke out,⁴³ as police and para-police (*chengguan*, 城管) dispersed the peaceful protest and tore down their protest banners.⁴⁴ Negotiations broke down between Wukan residents and officials, and strikes and protests soon fizzled out leaving Wukan citizens dissatisfied.

Protests flared up again on December 3rd after the Lufeng county government announced that “the conflict had already entered its resolution stage.”⁴⁵ The following day, Wukan residents responded with three days of strikes and demonstrations. Protest

40 Andrew Jacobs, 'Village Revolts Over Inequities of Chinese Life', in *New York Times*, 14 December 2011, viewed 22 April 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/15/world/asia/chinese-village-locked-in-rebellion-against-authorities.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all.

Wukan villagers experienced years of conflict with the local government over public land seizures without compensation since 1998. Mimi Lau, 'Villagers vow to fight if police attack', in *South China Morning Post*, 20 December 2011, viewed on 25 June 2012, <http://topics.scmp.com/news/china-news-watch/article/Villagers-vow-to-fight-if-police-attack>.

Village residents also worried that the sale of the communal farmland would make it harder for them to survive. The coastal village of Wukan once relied heavily on fishing until pollution and large fishing vessels hurt their yields, increasing their dependence on farming. Malcolm Moore, 'Rebel Chinese village of Wukan "has enough food for ten days"', in *The Guardian*, 14 December 2011, viewed 22 April 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/8955295/Rebel-Chinese-village-of-Wukan-has-food-for-ten-days.html>.

41 Gillian Wong, 'Villagers riot in southern China over land dispute', from Associated Press via *The Guardian*, 23 September 2011, viewed 22 April 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/feedarticle/9861347>.

42 Andrew Jacobs, 'Village Revolts Over Inequities of Chinese Life', in *The New York Times*, 14 December 2011, viewed 22 April 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/15/world/asia/chinese-village-locked-in-rebellion-against-authorities.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all.

43 'Guangdong Lufeng Xian Wukan cun nongmin jintian zaidu juxing shiwei youxing', in *Boxun.com*, 22 November 2011, viewed on 24 April 2012, <http://boxun.com/news/gb/china/2011/11/201111220709.shtml>.

44 'Shangwei Mass Protest Over False Reporting', from NTDTV.com, 23 November 2011, viewed 24 April 2012, <http://chinanews.blog.ntdtv.com/external-videos/shangwei-mass-protest-over-official-false-reporting/>

45 'Lufeng Wukan shijian jianqu lixing jieju', in *Lufeng Xuanquan Wenhua Wang*, 3 December 2012, viewed on 12 June 2012, <http://www.lfxcw.com.cn/shownews.asp?id=5445>.

actions escalated as a group of demonstrators captured several village government members, demanding the release of Zhuang Liehong, one of their leaders, who was being held for organizing petitions. The government hostages were released the same day they were captured, but Zhuang remained in police custody.⁴⁶

On December 9th, Shanwei prefecture government announced that they had removed the two top village party heads from their posts and filed for investigation against them by the party's internal disciplinary committee. They also announced they had temporarily frozen the land sale to the private developer.⁴⁷ That same day, village protest leader Xue Jinbo and several other village representatives were captured in Wukan by plain clothed men in a non-plated van, and were held by Lufeng county authorities.

On the night of December 11th, Xue died in police custody of a "sudden heart failure", according to the government authorities, though family members who were allowed to see the body claimed there were obvious signs of torture.⁴⁸ The village erupted in outrage the following day, and all village party heads and police fled Wukan. As villagers constructed barricades on all roads leading into town and organized demonstrations, police and paramilitary troops besieged Wukan, attempting to block all movement of resources and people. During the siege, villagers smuggled in supplies, as well as a group of foreign journalists.⁴⁹

In response, the Shanwei prefecture and Lufeng county governments remained firmly opposed to protests as villagers rallied in Wukan, especially protest leaders. The villagers held large demonstrations for several days, expressing their outrage with local officials while calling on high-level party officials to intervene on their behalf.

December 16th was the first full day of the media blackout. The following day, the village leaders delivered their ultimatum with several central demands: return their land, release of captured protest leaders, return the body of Xue Jinbo, and acknowledge the legitimacy of their independently chosen leaders. If their demands were not met within

46 Rahul Jacob and Zhou Ping, 'Fresh protests at restive Chinese town', in *Financial Times*, 6 December 2011, viewed 12 June 2012, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/4b2dd19c-1fee-11e1-8462-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1xCbp6l2>.

47 'Guangdong guanfang huiying Lufeng quntixing shijian cunmin suqiu jiben jieju', via Sina Corporation online at www.sina.com.cn, 9 December 2011, viewed on 11 June 2012, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2011-12-09/190023607122.shtml>.

48 Xue's family reported that his body bore various signs of violence, including broken thumbs, bloodied nose, and various bruises. At the time of the viewing, his was wearing a clean set of clothes, suggesting that he had been stripped and tortured before his death. Malcolm Moore, 'Wukan siege: the fallen villager', in *The Telegraph*, 16 December 2011, viewed on 24 January 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/8960078/Wukan-siege-the-fallen-villager.html>.

49 Some speculated that the presence of foreign journalists may have discouraged officials from using the most heavy-handed options for dealing with Wukan. Peter Simpson, 'China's rebel villagers in Wukan threaten to march on government offices', in *The Telegraph*, 17 December 2011, viewed on 3 February 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/8963670/Chinas-rebel-villagers-in-Wukan-threaten-to-march-on-government-offices.html>.

five days, the villagers threatened to march on the Lufeng county government building and take back Xue's remains themselves.⁵⁰

Officials proposed talks on the 18th, but protest leaders refused to meet unless their basic demands were met first. Wukan representatives estimated they had enough food to last seven more days.⁵¹

On December 19th, there were rumors that additional public security police were moving in from nearby prefectures to back up those forces already stationed outside Wukan.⁵² Just minutes before midnight on the 19th, the media blackout ended with a statement from prefecture party secretary Zheng Yanxiong. Zheng assured villagers that the land deal had been frozen, but not canceled, and that the two village heads had been removed from their positions. Although he promised not to prosecute most villagers, he did not promise security for protest leaders. With a less than satisfactory offer, villagers remained determined to march on the county government office.⁵³

On the morning of December 20th, prefecture officials made another attempt to solve the issue themselves, claiming they had bought back a portion of the land for the villagers and would continue the development deal only after receiving the opinion of the villagers.⁵⁴

Later the same day, provincial authorities announced they would now assume responsibility for the resolution of the conflict on the evening before the villager's proposed march. A working group was established in Lufeng, led by Guangdong provincial vice-secretary Zhu Mingguo, who assured the personal safety of protest leaders and promised that any villager previously charged with any troublemaking could find a "way out" if only they promised to cooperate with the government.⁵⁵

50 Villagers still appealed to the central government in Beijing for help and continued to praise the Communist Party. At the same time, protest leader Lin Zuluan expressed the harshest words yet in defiance of the local government: "If they have 100 coffins, they can bury me in the 99th. But I will save one for the corrupt officials who have been working with business people to take away our rights and our friend." Peter Simpson, 'China's rebel villagers in Wukan threaten to march on government offices', in *The Telegraph*, 17 December 2011, viewed on 6 February 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/8963670/Chinas-rebel-villagers-in-Wukan-threaten-to-march-on-government-offices.html>.

51 'Wukan cun 1.3 wan ren sheng liang 7 tian', in Ming Pao Daily News, 18 December 2011, (electronic copy via <http://cmp.hku.hk/2011/12/19/17650/>)

52 'Guangdong Wukan cun minzhu qi yi', in Apple Daily, 19 December 2011, electronic copy: <http://cmp.hku.hk/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/20111219%E8%8B%B9%E6%9E%9C%E6%97%A5%E6%8A%A5-%E5%A4%B4%E7%89%88-%E5%85%A8.jpg>.

This article was found in a blog post on China Media Project's website by China media expert David Bandurski. David Bandurski, 'Chinese-language coverage of Wukan', in China Media Project, 19 December 2011, viewed on 20 May 2012, <http://cmp.hku.hk/2011/12/19/17650/>.

53 'China village protest: Wukan residents plan march', in BBC News China online, 20 December 2011, viewed on 7 February 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-16260089>.

54 'Guangdong Shanwei Wukan ji: 404 mu tudi bei shouhui', in *Southern Daily*, 20 December 2011, viewed on February 7th, http://gd.nfdaily.cn/content/2011-12/20/content_35255072.htm.

55 '[Guangdong] Sheng gongzuo zu jinzhu Lufeng jie jue Wukan shijian', PTV via people.com.cn part of *People's Daily Online*, <http://tv.people.com.cn/GB/150716/156855/157034/16665547.html>

This statement, made on Guangdong evening news, is the first known statement of the Guangdong provincial authorities. A more complete statement can be found in news articles from the following day. Hong Jiyu, 'Sheng gongzuo zu jinzhu Lufeng Wukan qingting jie jue cunmin heli suqiu', in *Nanfang Ribao*, <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/70731/16665935.html>

On December 21st, one day before the villagers' scheduled march, village representative and protest leader Lin Zuluang met with vice secretary Zhu Mingguo for talks. Zhu promised to meet several of Lin's core demands, at least in principle: the village representatives were recognized as legitimate leaders, captured protest leaders would be released, though the body of Xue Jinbo would be released at a later date. After the negotiations, villagers dismantled barricades and took down protest banners that were hung around the city. Wukan residents resumed daily affairs, although several important issues remained yet to be resolved, including the status of the sold land, the selection of new village leaders and the return of the body of Xue Jinbo.⁵⁶

The weeks that followed produced several unexpected developments. Local party officials appointed Lin Zuluang as the party secretary of Wukan on January 15th.⁵⁷ On February 1st, villagers held an independent election to form an 11-member committee to oversee future elections, and held open and free elections for the village committee a month later.⁵⁸ These measures were praised not only in the village itself, but also by Guangdong party secretary Wang Yang, who took responsibility for the concessions to the protesting villagers, and also received praise in China's highest party newspaper *The People's Daily*.

The events following the compromise were also marked by further discontent. Officials failed to meet several of the villagers' basic demands. Xue Jinbo's body was not released by local authorities. His family members were pressured to sign documents stating that Xue died of natural causes and offered compensation, though they ultimately declined both. As for the sold land, protest leader Yang Semaog speculated that the land returned was only a quarter of the total land originally sold off.⁵⁹ Officials in Lufeng also refused to drop criminal charges against several men who were captured just before the village broke out in rebellion.⁶⁰

56 Peter Simpson, 'Wukan forces Chinese officials to release three villagers', 21 December 2011, last viewed on 7 February 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/8969702/Wukan-forces-Chinese-officials-to-release-three-villagers.html>

57 Michael Wines, 'Protester Is Made Boss by the Party He Defied', in *The New York Times*, 16 January 2012, last viewed 8 February 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/17/world/asia/protest-leader-becomes-party-boss-in-chinese-village-that-rebelled.html?_r=2.

58 Andrew Jacobs, 'Residents Vote in Chinese Village at Center of Protest', in *The New York Times*, 1 February 2012, last viewed 7 February 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/02/world/asia/residents-vote-in-chinese-village-at-center-of-protest.html>.

59 Huang Jingjing, 'Investigation in Wukan', in *Global Times*, 23 December 2011, viewed on 7 February 2012, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/NEWS/tabid/99/ID/689681/Investigation-in-Wukan.aspx>

60 Ibid.

Timeline concerning events in Wukan

Date/ Time	Event	Media: domestic television, newspapers, online news	Microblogs: reported keyword control
21.9.	Protest and riot in Lufeng county government building		
21.11.	Protest at county government building, strikes in village	County/Prefecture governments joint statement	
22.11.	Demonstrations continue		
23.11.	Demonstrations continue		
24.11.	Demonstrations end		
3.12.		County government statement: Wukan incident in "resolution stage"	
4.12.	Protests at county government building		
5.12.	Protests continue; Village government members held hostage, then released		
6.12.	Demonstrations continue		Blocked: "Wukan" (乌坎)
7.12.	Demonstrations end		
9.12.	Xue Jinbo and other protest leaders captured; Prefecture dismisses two top village heads	Prefecture/county government joint press conference: more protest leaders captured; claim basic demands have been met	
10.12.		Lufeng county public security: five leaders captured, all have confessed to crimes	
11.12.	Xue Jinbo dead; village uprising begins		
12.12.	All police and party officials out of village; blockade of village begins		
14.12.		Prefecture Mayor press conference; land deal "temporarily frozen"; prefecture website video of protest leaders	Blocked: "Wukan" (pinyin), "Xue Jinbo" (薛锦波), "sudden death" (猝死), "Zhuang Liehong" (庄烈宏), "Lufeng" (陆丰), "Shanwei" (汕尾)
15.12.		Media Blackout begins (evening)	
16.12.		Media Blackout	
17.12.	Villagers state demands: land, Xue body, legitimacy of protest leaders; threaten to march after 5 days time	Media Blackout	
18.12.	Proposed talk between gov. and protest leaders; protest leaders reject offer	Media Blackout	
19.12.	Possible police reinforcements from other provinces	Media Blackout ends (evening) Prefecture statement: land deal "frozen", will not prosecute "majority of extreme actions"	Unblocked: "Xue Jinbo" (薛锦波), "sudden death" (猝死), "Zhuang Liehong" (庄烈宏), "Lufeng" (陆丰), "Shanwei" (汕尾)
20.12. morning		Prefecture government statement: bought back portion of land	
20.12. evening		Guangdong Provincial government statement: guarantees safety of protest leaders	
21.12.	Protest leaders meet government officials; protesters call off march		Unblocked: "Wukan" (乌坎)
22.12.	Proposed march date		

3.2 Political dynamics of the response in Wukan

真诚修得：政府遇到突发事件就知暴力“维稳”，已经走入“能压则压，压不了就谈；能拖则拖、拖不了则办”的被动局面？真是黔驴技穷、像个泼妇骂街，在执政为民的理念上毫无建树⁶¹

*Sincerely Cultivating Virtue*⁶²: When the government is faced with sudden occurrence⁶³, they only know how to respond with violence to “maintain stability”. Hence they have entered the mode of passive response: “Suppress things if you can, if you can’t then start negotiations. Delay the situation if you can, if you can’t then come up with a solution.” They are truly like a donkey at the end of its rope, or a shrew shouting abuse in the street. As for the government purporting to serve the people, they are making no contribution whatsoever.

The roots of the Wukan incident in late 2011 can be traced back for years, as is the case with many land disputes. When citizens feel abused by the actions of local government officials, there is seldom hope for legal recourse. Frustrations turn into demonstrations and can even become violent, often catching the attention of higher levels of government as well. From here, the government generally responds in a predictable fashion.

According to Zhou Xiaozheng, professor of sociology at Renmin University, “the party has always used two hands to deal with such crises. One hand arrests a few scapegoats, and the other hand tries to calm down everyone else.”⁶⁴ Typically, the local government performs the strong-arm tactics while higher levels of government play the placater, though this line can shift over the course of a conflict and tactics are mixed. The “good cop, bad cop” roles, as the term suggests, may give the strong and soft arms a different appearance, but they are ultimately extensions of a common institutional body, the Chinese party-state.

Beyond these dynamics, one additional factor played a role in the exceptional outcome of Wukan, namely, Guangdong province party secretary Wang Yang’s bid for a seat in the politburo standing committee.

The Chinese government is preparing for a leadership transition set to take place late this year, and many high-level party members have been vying for a position in the politburo standing committee. Wukan emerged as a surprise test for Wang Yang, and the provincial government’s more generous response to the situation was undoubtedly influenced by Wang’s efforts to maximize, or at least maintain, his chances of gaining a top spot in government.

61 This quote was found in a blog post about the suppression of a strike at a steel plant in Chengdu, Sichuan. This quote was most likely taken from Sina’s microblog users. Coincidentally, of the author of the quote cannot be found when performing a user search, perhaps another subject of microblog control. You Mu You, ‘You jian waibu shili’, in Google+, 7 January 2012, viewed on 20 May 2012, <https://plus.google.com/116443978913077338683/posts/XK1Kr5FactK>

62 真诚修得 could be translated as “sincerely cultivating virtue”

63 突发事件 or “sudden occurrence”, is a term often used to refer to things like mass incidents, and is commonly used on Sina’s microblogs to search for information about politically sensitive issues.

64 Lauren Keane, ‘Chinese Governor, demonstrators hold high-profile meeting’, in *The Washington Post*, 22 November 2008, viewed on 5 May 2012, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/21/AR2008112103472.html>.

Just days after the concessions given by the Guangdong government, Wang received praise from China's main party newspaper, the People's Daily, for his "political courage".⁶⁵ What a *New York Times* article dubbed "Wang Yang's gamble" seemed to have paid off, at least in the short term.⁶⁶

3.4 Media control campaign

This section compares the passage of events of the Wukan incident with the timing of keyword control on Sina's microblog platform and the timing of party statements via traditional media outlets. A study done by the *China Digital Times* (CDT), a US-based group tracking and translating Chinese media for propaganda and censorship, has an ongoing project that tracks the blocking and unblocking of "sensitive terms" on Sina's microblog platform. The CDT maintains a database of keywords contributed by volunteers and staff as they note changes in keyword control on Sina's microblogs. Because the information is contributed on a voluntary basis as events occur, we cannot be sure of the precise time of blocking or unblocking; an instance of keyword control could have initially occurred days before it was first noted by staff, however, hotly followed issues have a higher likelihood of more precise findings.

CDT staff paid particularly close attention to keyword control around Wukan, and published an article detailing their findings.⁶⁷ Unfortunately, the first CDT data on Wukan begins on December 6th, and it is not clear whether the CDT check search keywords every day. It seems that, in addition to the contributions of volunteers, staff conducted special searches of collection of keywords related to Wukan at particular junctures in protests. Their data, therefore, cannot be considered an exact record of keyword control as they occur. Nevertheless, the information obtained offers invaluable insights.

The first significant statements from government authorities via the media occurred during the strikes and protests at the Lufeng county government building in late November. It appears that keyword control had not been used at this point, but the government responded to protests with propaganda tactics.

After demonstrations began on the morning November 21st, the Shanwei prefecture and Lufeng county governments released a joint statement that evening via news outlets under the control of the Propaganda Department.⁶⁸ The statement combined elements of

65 Sharon LaFraniere, 'A Chinese Official Tests a New Political Approach', in *The New York Times*, 30 December 2011, viewed on 4 March 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/31/world/asia/chinese-official-wang-yang-tests-new-political-approach.html?pagewanted=all>.

66 Ibid.

67 "'Wukan' on Sina Weibo: Unblocked as Protests Postponed [Update]", in *China Digital Times*, 21 December 2011, viewed 15 June 2011, <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2011/12/wukan-on-sina-weibo-unblocked-as-protest-postponed/>

68 'Lufeng shi Wukan cun shu bai cunmin juti shi zhengfu shangfang' in Southcn.com, 21 November 2011, viewed on 29 May 2012, http://news.southcn.com/dishi/shanwei/swyc/content/2011-11/21/content_33593015.htm. The statements outlining the viewpoints of the Shanwei and Lufeng governments were released via Southcn.com (nanfangwang 南方网), self professed to be under the management of the Propaganda Department of the Guangdong Provincial Party Committee: "南方新闻网 (www.southcn.com) 是广东省委宣传部主管, 南方报业传媒集团主办, 联合羊城晚报、省广播电影电视局、省新闻出版局、省新闻出版集团等出资单位共同建设, 于2001年12月13日正式开通。", <http://www.southcn.com/v2008/footnavi/aboutus/>

the understanding and placation with strong, even hostile, warnings. The governments pledged to form joint working groups to investigate the issue, promising to resolve the villager's "reasonable demands". More heavy-handed language was added, threatening to punish those who had "broken the law". The statement also emphasizing the need for the party to "increase the strength of propaganda" efforts to "get a hold the correct orientation of public opinion", stressing the need to perform proper "thought work" to convince Wukan residence and their 13 representatives.⁶⁹

The county government released a statement on December 3rd, claiming that protests had entered the "resolution stage". This statement seems to have backfired, as villagers mobilized for three days of protests and direct action.⁷⁰ The factual claims of the article, released directly from the Lufeng county party propaganda department, were likely enough to incite anger in the village, namely that the conflict was near resolution. In addition, the tone significantly added to the statement's inflammatory capacity, which was at times overtly patronizing.⁷¹ The government chose not to respond to the protests with a statement, and these events were never mentioned in future government statements; perhaps, in light of the botched statement, silence was the best response.

The first recorded instance of keyword control was reported after a few days of protest on December 6th, where the keyword "Wukan" (乌坎) was reported blocked.⁷²

The provincial and county governments relied on media statements to reassert their position as the actions of the government and protesters escalated. On December 9th, prefecture and county level officials held a press conference. A Lufeng county leader stated that public security officials had successfully caught Xue and other protest leaders.⁷³ In a separate statement, presumably from the same press conference, the Lufeng government declared that the villager's "basic demands" had been met and that the prefecture and county would be working together to fulfill the reasonable demands of the villagers.⁷⁴

69 Ibid.

70 'Lufeng Wukan shijian jianqu lixing jieju', in *Lufeng Xuanquan Wenhua Wang*, 3 December 2012, viewed on 12 June 2012, <http://www.lfxcw.com.cn/shownews.asp?id=5445>.

71 The website of the propaganda department of the Lufeng county government, called "Lufeng Propaganda Culture Net". The article used a mixture of official and colloquial jargon, untypical of most party statements, and more outrightly offensive to protesters. The article opened with fairly standard political jargon, chiding past actions of the villagers, particularly the September riots, in which villagers "used illegal gatherings, illegal organizations, and other actions", "confused right from wrong", and "created serious damage". In a twist of rhetoric, the statement used markedly informal chiding remarks: "Lately, ...the way in which villagers have been expressing their requests has been getting more reasonable by the day. There! Isn't that the way things should be?" 当前...村民对表达诉求的方式也日趋向理性化, 这是一个很好的开端。本来嘛! 'Lufeng Wukan shijian jianqu lixing jieju', in *Lufeng Xuanquan Wenhua Wang*, 3 December 2012, viewed on 12 June 2012, <http://www.lfxcw.com.cn/shownews.asp?id=5445>.

72 Again, not knowing exact timing of the blocking puts further limitations on our ability to know what role the blocking played, and when it was implemented. Several foreign media outlets picked up on the protests on December 6th, so although the blocking could have happened earlier, it seems possible that a CDT database contributor could have learned heard about the protests through these reports on the 6th and ran a test on Sina's microblogs.

73 '“Wukan cun 921 shijian” chuzhi qingkuang tongbao daza weishou fenzi beigou', http://news.dayoo.com/news/201112/09/85080_20884797.htm

74 'Guangdong guanfang huiying Lufeng quntixing shijian cunmin suqiu jiben jieju', via Sina Corporation online at www.sina.com.cn, 9 December 2011, viewed on 11 June 2012, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2011-12-09/190023607122.shtml>.

On December 10th, the Lufeng county Public Security Bureau stated that a total of five protest leaders, including Xue Jinbo, had been captured for inciting the riots in September. The article noted that all five had confessed to crimes.⁷⁵ Xue died on the evening of the following day, and by the morning of the 12th, party heads and police had left and village was surrounded.

On December 14th, the local government stepped up their media campaign efforts via traditional media outlets. Shanwei government held a press conference to release its position on Wukan. Shanwei mayor Wu Zili mixed strong rhetoric with efforts to calm the situation. Wu stated that top village party leaders had been removed from their posts and that the Lufeng county government had “temporarily frozen” the land deal.⁷⁶ At the same time, Mayor Wu denounced two village protest leaders by name – Lin Zuluán⁷⁷ and Yang Semaó – for inciting the villagers’ protests.⁷⁸ He also pledged to “strike hard” (严厉打击) against those who had participated in rioting and destruction of property, but promised to consider better treatment for those who turned themselves in.⁷⁹ That same day, the Shanwei government website posted extensive video of the remaining captured protest leaders meeting with their family members who came to “inquire about their health and condition of their lives”.⁸⁰ In the footage, filmed the previous day, protest leaders assured family members they were being treated well and promised that they would cooperate with the government.⁸¹

CDT ran its first coordinated test of search terms related to Wukan on Dec. 14th. As tensions reached new heights, keyword control increased. On that day, the mayor of Shanwei prefecture denounced protest leaders and vowing to crackdown on troublemakers. Tests detected several keywords that were either blocked that day or had already been blocked, including the word “Wukan”, both in Chinese characters and the romanized phonetic spelling (乌坎 and Wukan), the name of one captured protest leader “Zhuang Liehong” (庄烈宏), “Xue Jinbo” (薛锦波) the dead village leader and the term “sudden death” (猝死), as well as “Lufeng” (陆丰) and “Shanwei” (汕尾).

75 ‘Guangdong sheng Lufeng shi Wukan shijian 5 cunmin shexian fanzui bei xingju’, in Nanfangwang, via Tencent, 10 December 2011, viewed on 7 May 2012, <http://news.qq.com/a/20111210/000754.htm>

76 ‘Guangdong Lufeng Wukan weiji cungan bei jiwei “shuangguan”’, in Chinanews.com, 14 December 2011, viewed on 26 April 2012, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2011/12-14/3532826.shtml>

77 The name of Lin Zuluán, the Wukan protest leader who was later appointed Wukan party secretary after the uprising, is a somewhat ambiguous issue. Some have referred to him as Lin Zulian (林祖恋) while others use Lin Zuluán (林祖銮). The last character of his official ID is “luan” and not “lian”, but because both characters are pronounced “lian” in the local dialect, they have been used interchangeably in the past even in government document. Though recent Chinese-language news articles regarding Wukan have referred to him using both names, Lin Zulian seems to be quite common in the English language media. I have therefore chosen to call him Lin Zuluán, the name on his official ID, throughout this paper. However, those who wish to know more about him should use both names when searching for information.

78 ‘Guangdong Lufeng Wukan weiji cungan bei jiwei “shuangguan”’, in Chinanews.com, 14 December 2011, viewed on 26 April 2012, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2011/12-14/3532826.shtml>

79 ‘Guangdong Wukan shijian xianfan siyin paichu waili chafang jianyi jiepou’, in Chinanews.com, 14 December 2011, viewed on 26 April 2012, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2011/12-14/3532827.shtml>

80 ‘Wukan “9.21” shijian bei jiya renyuan jiashu tanshi’, in www.shanwei.gov.cn, 14 December 2011, viewed on 7 May 2012, <http://www.shanwei.gov.cn/163661.html>.

81 Ibid. For analysis of these videos in English, please see this series of blog posts from China Geeks: C. Custer, ‘The Siege of Wukan, Part III: Making Martyrs’, in chinageeks.org, 15 December 2011, viewed on 7 May 2012, http://chinageeks.org/2011/12/the-siege-of-wukan-part-iii-making-martyrs/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+Chinageeks+%28ChinaGeeks%29.

Despite an increased number of blocked keywords, conversations about Wukan continued largely due to the creativity of netizens in using inventive references to Wukan. As a created term became popularized, however, censors soon picked up on the trend and blocked the new term, in a kind of cat and mouse game that has become common on the Chinese internet. For example, instead of using the “Wukan”, netizens began using alternative Chinese names like “Wu-village”⁸² or the romanized abbreviation “WK”.

On December 15th, no new official statements were issued, and news outlets circulated the previous days’ news.⁸³ On the 16th, a full-scale blackout began; no Chinese news outlets published any articles related to Wukan. Villagers held a rally for their fallen protest leader Xue Jinbo,⁸⁴ while the Shanwei mayor Wu Zili spoke at a press conference about the economic development of the region at a business investment expo.⁸⁵

The nation-wide blackout on the issue of Wukan continued nearly four days until just before midnight on the evening of December 19th, when Shanwei party secretary Zheng Yanxiong released a statement via an article⁸⁶ with the headline reading “Guangdong Shanwei Municipal Committee Secretary: [We] Will Not Investigate the Vast Majority of the Extreme Actions of Wukan Villagers.”⁸⁷ The stance of the party had changed slightly; the land deal was now referred to as “frozen” as opposed to “temporarily frozen”, the government’s stance as of the 14th. Interestingly, Zheng statement heavily emphasized the role of “outside media publishing untrue information” inhibiting the resolution

82 “乌村”. The *China Digital Times* did not cite this term in their research, but the author witnessed widespread use of the term, at least as frequently as “WK”.

83 These were my own personal findings after searching Chinese media archives. The last news piece published regarding Wukan was a television news clip found on People.com (人民网), is time stamped 19:50 on December 15th. The piece was presumably played on the evening news via Guangdong Television. ‘[Guangdong] Shanwei tongbao Wukan Shijian xianyiren siyin paichu waili zhisi keneng’, in People.com.cn, 15 December 2011, viewed on 9 May 2012, <http://tv.people.com.cn/GB/150716/156855/157034/16620482.html>.

The last news article was also published on People.com earlier that morning, timestamped at 9:56, and contained much of the same content as the television story ran later that night. ‘Guangdong Wukan shijian xianyifan siyin paichu waili chafang jianyi jiepou’, in People.com.cn, 15 December 2012, viewed on 9 May 2012, <http://legal.people.com.cn/GB/188502/16613450.html>.

84 Malcolm Moore, ‘Wukan siege: rebel Chinese village holds memorial for fallen villager’, in *The Telegraph*, 16 December 2011, viewed 26 April 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/8960077/Wukan-siege-rebel-Chinese-village-holds-memorial-for-fallen-villager.html>

85 It appears Wu Zili actually attended the conference, the East Guangdong Overseas Chinese Expo (粤东侨博会), on both the 15th and the 16th. Interestingly, at the press conference, Wu made reference to “the six news”, ideals for improving the prosperity, the last of which was “ensuring that improving the lives of citizens make new improvements” (保障改善民生取得新进步). ‘Di si jie Yue Dong Jie Bohui jin kaimu Wu Zili zai jizhe zhaodaihui shang tongbao woshi jingji shehui fazhan qingquang’, in swboftec.gov.cn, 16 December 2011, viewed on 26 April 2012, <http://www.swboftec.gov.cn/shownews.aspx?newsid=1955>.

86 The earliest version of the article found was released through the website of a major news outlet, Phoenix Television. This station, however, is not explicitly part of party propaganda organs, similar to the outlets that released other important party statements. Phoenix has an ambiguous and perhaps special status in the Chinese media. It is owned by an independent Hong Kong-based media group, it is one of the only non-mainland based media groups in mainland China. Though they have demonstrated compliance with state media control efforts, they also have a reputation for releasing more edgy content that may stray slightly from party line. This article, however, is almost completely composed of direct quotes from party official Zheng Yanxiong. It is unclear exactly how these reporters received this statement.

87 Zhang Hui and Wang Jlan, ‘Guangdong Shanwei shiwei shuji: buhui zhuijiu Wukan dabufen cunmin guoji xingdong’, via Phoenix Television online, 19 December 2011, viewed on 15 June 2012, http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/detail_2011_12/19/11427773_0.shtml.

of the Wukan incident.⁸⁸ This had contributed to the “extreme distrust” of the local government.⁸⁹ The article also mentioned Xue Jinbo by name, acknowledging that his death had increased resistance among villagers, though not implying it was the fault of the government.

On Dec. 19th, the CDT report noted that several keywords had been unblocked. Though the Chinese characters “Wukan” remained blocked, sensitive terms like “Shanwei”, “sudden death”, “Xue Jinbo” and the pinyin “Wukan” were unblocked. Not all terms, however, were unblocked, including “Wukan” (乌坎) and “Lufeng” (陆丰). Interestingly, the unblocked terms pertained exactly to the content of the public statement while other keywords remained blocked, as there seemed to be no sign that tensions had decreased.⁹⁰

Another statement came from the prefecture government on the morning of December 20th. Shanwei prefecture party secretary Zheng Yanxiong claimed that a specific portion of land had been bought back by the prefecture government.⁹¹

That evening, state television announced that the provincial government would assume responsibility for resolving the protests.⁹² This statement, while it in some ways mirrored the rhetoric of statements from the prefecture and county governments, included significant improvement compared to the position of the Shanwei prefecture government.

Guangdong provincial vice-secretary Zhu Mingguo stated that the “basic requests of the villagers are reasonable.” Official media also reported that “some of the unreasonable acts of the villagers were understandable.” The working group expressed “understanding” for both those who participated in “unreasonable” acts of protest, including property damage, as well as for village representatives who organized the resistance; as long as these parties expressed “repentance” and promised to cooperate with the government, the working group promised there would be a “way out” for them, no doubt comforting the protest leaders concerned with their own safety.⁹³ In addition,

88 汕尾官员表示，会解决村民诉求，但有境外媒体发布不实消息，则不利于问题解决。

89 官员称，村民代表对政府极不信任

90 The *Apple Daily* of Hong Kong, who also relied heavily on social media information, warned that the situation was “worsening by the day” with reports that military police units were called in from neighboring prefectures. If these reports are correct, it would appear that this statement came when tensions were around their climax. ‘Guangdong Wukan cun minzhu qiyi’, in *Apple Daily*, 19 December 2011, electronic copy: <http://cmp.hku.hk/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/20111219%E8%B9%9E%E6%9C%E6%97%A5%E6%8A%A5-%E5%A4%B4%E7%89%88-%E5%85%A8.jpg>

91 The article claims to have bought back 404 mu of land (1 mu = approximately 1/15 hectare, or 667 square meters). Recall that village protest leader Yang Semaoyang later said that the land bought back was only a portion of total land in question.

Article from the 20th with the position of the Shanwei prefecture government: ‘Wukan Shijian: zhengfu shouhui bing peichang 404 mu sheshi yongdi’ in *Nanfang Daily*, via Southerncn.com, 20 December 2011, viewed 26 April 2012, http://law.southcn.com/c/2011-12/20/content_35272245.htm

92 ‘[Guangdong] Sheng gongzuo zu jinzhu Lufeng jieju Wukan shijian’, PTV via people.com.cn part of *People’s Daily Online*, <http://tv.people.com.cn/GB/150716/156855/157034/16665547.html>. Hong Jiyu, ‘Sheng gongzuo zu jinzhu Lufeng Wukan qingting jieju cunmin heli suqiu’, in *Nanfang Ribao* <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/70731/16665935.html>. The rhetoric from the statements of the Shanwei prefecture in the midst of the stand-off was eerily similar to that of the provincial level government in their offering of concessions. Terms like “reasonable demands” (合理诉求) and “according to laws and regulations” (依法依规) can be found statements from both levels of government.

93 Here I am paraphrasing from the statements of Zhu and the working group. Ibid.

the statement promised “free movement”⁹⁴ for village representatives as long as they promised to cooperate with the provincial working group.

Many mainland newspapers released the provincial government’s stance through the night and into the next day, December 21st. The same day, when protest leaders met with provincial representatives, and Wukan villagers called off their march and their protests, many essential words were unblocked, including the Chinese names “Wukan” (乌坎) and “Lufeng” (陆丰) as well as the romanized abbreviation “WK”.⁹⁵

94 来去自由. Ibid.

95 The following day, however, the Chinese term “Wukan” was then reblocked. The records of the CDT database reflect that “Wukan” (乌坎) was tested again on January 15th, 2012, and was then unblocked. This does not conclusively mean, however, that the keyword has since been unblocked. “Xue Jinbo” was also reblocked according to the, CDT database, on when it was tested on December 31st.

“Wukan” on Sina Weibo: Unblocked as Protests Postponed [Update], in *China Digital Times*, posted 21 December 2011, updated 22 December 2011, viewed on 4 March 2012, <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2011/12/wukan-on-sina-weibo-unblocked-as-protest-postponed/>

4. THE CASE OF HAIMEN, IN THE SHADOW OF WUKAN

4.1 The events of Haimen

The protests in Wukan were quite remarkable in several respects, namely its duration, scale, and the response of the village government when it fled the city.⁹⁶ Villagers maintained organized protest efforts for months, the entire village of over 20,000 participated in resistance efforts, and the village party officials were driven out and besieged the town.

Wukan, however, was not the only site of mass protest in Guangdong province at the time, let alone in China at large. Nor was it the only mass incident attracting attention, both of netizens and media control institutions, on Sina's microblog platform. One US-based Chinese-language media group reported mass incidents in at least 11 other towns and villages in Guangzhou at around the same time.⁹⁷ These reports were amassed from microblogs, in some cases with pictures and video of large gatherings, protests signs, riot police and also violence.

Chinese microblogs in general are notorious rumor mills. Many rumors may simply be rumors, without substantial evidence. On the other hand, one can only speculate as to how many mass incidents occur in China which are never recorded, either because of suppression or general obscurity.

One of these rumored protests, however, was not only highly documented but received media attention in China and abroad. Large scale protests broke out in the town of Haimen in Shantou prefecture, on Dec. 20th, as Guangdong vice-secretary Zhu Mingguo lauded the people of Wukan for standing up for their interests. Though some media outlets were eager to postulate links between Wukan and Haimen protests, it seems they were not directly related.⁹⁸ Even if there were reports of protesters in Haimen who,

96 Jennifer Richmond, 'Three Reasons Why China's Wukan Protests Are Totally Unprecedented', in *Business Insider*, 16 December 2011, viewed on 1 March 2012, http://articles.businessinsider.com/2011-12-16/news/30523802_1_protests-wukan-village

97 The names of the towns and villages listed in this report from Boxun: 龙头村, 汕头, 白塔镇, 汐南镇, 海门镇, 甲东镇, 濠江, 先城镇, 两英镇, 司马镇, 中山. My own searches found rumors of mass incidents in several other villages in Guangdong: 岱头村, 高厝村, 上岱美村, 七陂村. 'Guangdong shiwei kuoda: Haimen chongtu jajiu, Wukan xuxiao youxing', in Boxun, 21 December 2011, viewed on 1 March 2012, <http://boxun.com/news/gb/china/2011/12/201112211633.shtml>

98 Many more activist Chinese language papers based in Hong Kong, the USA and elsewhere seemed to 'play up' the connections, and were quick to use terms like "Chinese Spring" or "Jasmine Revolution", in reference to the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East in the spring of 2011. Though Wukan was a particularly notable protest in many ways, foreign media seemed particularly excited when it was discovered that Haimen, a town not far from Wukan, was also in protest. Some mainstream media outlets covering the protests, including *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph* and *The New York Times*, acknowledged that the protests seemed not to be directly related.

It is important to remember that Haimen and Wukan are but two of the many thousands of mass incidents that occur every year, though they were both quite large in scale. Their brief time in the spotlight gave much-needed attention to the struggles of Chinese people, but media outlets were perhaps too eager to connect dots and label these two protests as the initial movements in a growing resistance. Indeed, in what seems to be a headline gaff, one article from AsiaNews.it is titled "Wukan inspires news protest as people in Haimen take to streets against pollution." in AsiaNews.it, 21 December 2011, viewed on 2 March 2012, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Wukan-inspires-news-protest-as-people-in-Haimen-take-to-the-streets-against-pollution-23499.html>.

Timeline concerning events in Haimen

Date/ Time	Event	Media: domestic television, newspapers, online news	Microblogs: reported keyword control
Date/ Time	Event	Media: domestic television, newspapers, online news	Microblogs: reported keyword control
20.12.	Demonstrations begin, clashes with police, rumored protester deaths		Blocked: "Haimen" (海门)
21.12.	Demonstrations continue	Shantou prefecture statement: "temporarily suspend" project	Unblocked: "Haimen" (海门)
22.12.	Demonstrations continue		
23.12.	Demonstrations continue; agreement reached in the evening	Television campaign against demonstrators	
24.12.			
25.12.		Shantou prefecture statement: issue resolved	

when asked, voiced support for citizens of Wukan, Haimen's protests began on their own accord, not inspired from outside.

News of protests in Haimen first surfaced on the morning of December 20th, and were quickly picked up by foreign media. Haimen citizens were protesting plans to construct a second coal-fired plant in their town, already troubled with pollution.⁹⁹ Thousands of citizens turned out to protest; some stormed and occupied a government building while others blockaded the highway. When citizens clashed with riot police, over 100 were beaten and there were reports of the deaths of a 15-year old boy and a middle-aged woman, though some reports claimed as many as six died.¹⁰⁰ Authorities said they would temporarily suspend construction on the plant, however, protesters demanded the project be stopped completely.¹⁰¹

Over the next few days, protests intensified and so did the local government's response. After being met with teargas, Haimen residents blocked the highway and prepared sanitary masks and buckets of water to deal with the teargas; villagers resisted police, extinguishing tear gas volleys or hurling them back in the direction of the police. Several demonstrators were captured by police and plain clothed officers; thereafter, the release of the captured residents also became a central demand of the protesters.¹⁰²

99 Peter Simpson, 'Wukan: protests across South China as riot police take on demonstrators in Haimen' in *The Telegraph*, 20 December 2011, viewed on 1 March 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/8967692/Wukan-protests-across-South-China-as-riot-police-take-on-demonstrators-in-Haimen.html>

100 'Haimen 10 wan ren baodong chuan 6 si 200 shang', in *World Journal*, 21 December 2011, viewed on 2 March 2012, http://www.worldjournal.com/view/full_news/16852294/article-%E6%B5%B7%E9%96%8010%E8%90%AC%E4%BA%BA%E6%9A%B4%E5%8B%95-%E5%82%B3%E6%AD%BB200%E5%82%B7-?instance=hota

101 'Protests Over Power Plant Escalate in Haimen (with Video)', in *China Digital Times*, 22 December 2011, viewed on 3 May 2012, <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2011/12/protests-over-power-plant-escalate-in-haimen/>

102 This blog post combined two stories from two Hong Kong media outlets, the *Apple Daily* and the *Mingpao.com*. There is also some excellent video footage of the protesters stand-offs with riot police. The original articles could not be found. 'Gangmei: Niangzi jun guidi kuqiu Haimen siri douzheng zhengfu zhong chengnuo yongjiu ting jian dianchang' in *Molihua.org*, 24 December 2011, viewed on March 2 2012, http://www.molihua.org/2011/12/7_24.html

Protests in Haimen lasted for a total of four days until local officials announced on December 23rd that they had agreed to a dialogue with residents and would temporarily suspend the construction of the power plant as well as release detained protesters.¹⁰³ Demonstrations had ended by the following day.

4.2 Haimen media control campaign

Similar to the way in which Shanwei prefecture handled the Wukan incident, the Shantou prefecture government on the one hand combined state violence with a sharp condemnation of the protests, suggesting that they were inspired by small groups of troublemakers rather than a result of popular discontent. On the other hand, they asserted that the general concerns of citizens were valid and that conflict had been already been resolved. Part of the broad media campaign around the Haimen incident did include an instance of keyword control, where the term “Haimen” was blocked for a short time on Sina’s microblog platform.

When protests began in the morning of the 20th, and multiple reports cited that the keyword “Haimen” was blocked that evening.¹⁰⁴ Interestingly, a report from the Chinese financial press, concerned that the protests may affect related stock prices, noted that keywords related to the Haimen protests reached 4th on the list of top searches on Sina’s microblog platform that evening December 20th.¹⁰⁵ The following morning, an article appeared in the Shantou Daily with official statements of the Shantou prefecture level government and party committee.

Some time on December 21st, “Haimen” was unblocked on Sina’s microblog platform.¹⁰⁶ That day, the local party newspaper in Shantou reported on the event, claiming that only a few hundred “misguided” citizens who “misunderstood the truth” had blocked

103 ‘South China town unrest cools after dialogue’, in *Channel News Asia*, 23 December 2011, viewed on 1 March 2012, http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp_asiapacific/view/1173165/1/.html

104 Two news outlets that note “Haimen” (海门) was blocked on Tuesday the 20th:

‘Police disperse power plant protest in China’, in CNN.com, 21 December 2011, viewed on April 30th 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/12/20/world/asia/china-protest/>

‘Unrest Spreads In Southern China’, in Radio Free Asia, 20 December 2011, viewed on April 30th 2012, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/unrest-12202011133121.html>

One China blogger, William Farris, noted the transition from unblocked to blocked complete with screen shots of his searches on Sina’s microblog platform: William Farris, “Another Protest, Another City Is Censored by Sina Weibo – Haimen Guangdong”, via Google+, 20 December 2011, viewed on 30 April 2012, <https://plus.google.com/u/0/10637898011121757454/posts/XunL9a6vNfU>

105 The article states the that the related terms reached the #4 spot at 8pm on December 20th. It is unclear whether that term was “Haimen” (海门) or a related term. ‘Haimen quyu dianchang huanbao shou zhiyi Huaneng ji Huadian xiangmu huo shou yingxiang’ in STCN.com, via JRJ.com, 21 December 2011, viewed on 2 May 2012, <http://stock.jrj.com.cn/2011/12/21021211879195.shtml>

106 To my knowledge, the first documentation of the unblocking of “Haimen” (海门) was by China blogger William Ferris. William Ferris, ‘Sina Weibo Stops Censoring “Haimen,” Starts Censoring Name of Party Secretary Leading Wukan Negotiations’, on Google+, 21 December 2011, viewed 2 May 2012, <https://plus.google.com/u/0/10637898011121757454/posts/dtfMVPkxPD>

the road.¹⁰⁷ The same article also announced that the project would be temporarily suspended.¹⁰⁸

As protesters continued demonstrations, the media campaign also intensified. On December 23rd, the final day of protests, state television ran video of two protesters handcuffed and in prison confessing to their crimes, one saying “it was wrong to surround the government and block the highway.”¹⁰⁹ State television also aired programming where a panel of Chinese legal experts urged protestors to stop, warning that they could spend up to five years in jail.¹¹⁰

After an agreement had been reached, demonstrations ended. Two days after the agreement, the Shantou government newspaper released its second official statement, summarizing the incident.¹¹¹

107 “Misunderstood the truth” is my translation of 不明真相. Also, the full extent of derogatory terms used for protesters was considerably harsher than I have shown above. It was said that worries about pollution had ‘bewitched’ or ‘poisoned’ a small group of people (受一小部分人蛊惑). ‘Guangdong Shantou Haimen zhen fasheng qunti shijian zhi jiaotong dusai.’ in *Shantou Ribao*, 21 December 2011, viewed on 4 March 2012, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2011-12-21/102923669172.shtml>

108 Ibid.

109 ‘Teargas fired at Chinese protesters in Haimen’, in *The Guardian*, 23 December 2011, viewed on 2 March 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/dec/23/china-protesters-teargas-fired>

110 Ibid.

111 ‘Difang Fazhan Xuyao Anding Hexie de Shehui Huanjing’, in *Shantou Daily*, 25 December 2011, viewed on 26 June 2012, http://www.stdaily.com.cn/html/2011-12/25/content_278327.htm

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Directives and keyword control in Wukan and Haimen

Exploring how keyword control works is a central goal of this paper. As for determining which are the results of a government directive, the most compelling cases seem to be the initial acts of keyword control regarding a particular issue. It appears that these first blockings are a sign that the government needs to contain the spread of independent information. This seemed to be the case when blocking was first initiated in both Wukan and Haimen. Blocking the name “Haimen” when protests began on Dec. 20th stifled conversations as the Shantou prefecture assessed the situation and prepared an official statement. In Wukan, the first reported blocking of “Wukan” occurred when villagers unexpectedly used strong actions, including strikes, protests and hostage-taking, after a statement of the county government. The situation had escalated beyond the perceived control of the government, the term was blocked, and no other further statement was made until the government made its next move by arresting protest leaders. Perhaps on the 6th and on the 20th, Sina was contacted by government representatives of the somewhere in Shanwei and Shantou prefectures respectively, with “new topics to be monitored”, in the words of Sina editor Chen Tong.

The unblocking of keywords is of particular interest. In both Wukan and Haimen, it would appear as though the party wished to make room for their propaganda statements.

In order to make a public statement regarding Wukan after the media blackout, the provincial government had to roll back previous media restrictions, both breaking the media blackout and unblocking keywords on Sina, to create a space for their voice to be heard. Moreover, while other Wukan-related keywords remained blocked, the unblocked keywords were precisely relevant to the official statement of the Shanwei prefecture party secretary Zheng Yanxiong: the prefecture delivering the statement “Shanwei” (汕尾), fallen protest leader “Xue Jinbo” (薛锦波) specifically mentioned in the statement as an issue of concern to the villagers and a subject twisted, in the eyes of the party, by foreign media, and another Xue-related keyword “sudden death” (猝死). The correlation between unblocked keywords and the statement points to the presence of a directive; in addition, as Wukan protests were near the climax of their tensions, there seems to be little incentive for Sina to unblock such sensitive keywords without an official directive.

In the case of Haimen, a previously blocked keyword was quickly unblocked, at the same time that the prefecture level state paper released the government’s first official statement regarding the protests. The keyword remained unblocked, even as protests and clashes with the police continued for several days until the end of the demonstration. Perhaps the government felt no need to order further silencing of the issue, and believed that it could be resolved through propaganda and force. Again, unblocking a keyword in the midst of unfolding volatile protests would seem a risky move for Sina, and is likely the result of a directive.

One might be tempted to consider each significant case of keyword control to be the result of a government directive. This, however, seems unlikely in the case of Sina. We might turn the question around and ask which cases of keyword control may not be the result of government directives. Blocking efforts, as opposed to unblocking, are likely

to come from a combination of sources. Recalling the words of Sina editor Chen Tong,¹¹² it seems that while officials may give an initial directive, Sina itself constantly watches online dialogue as events unfold. It seems most likely that the blocking of surrogate keywords, creative synonyms used to sidestep keyword control like “Wu-village” or “WK” taking the place of “Wukan” (乌坎), is the work of Sina rather than the result of a directive.

Beyond Sina’s internal editing team, Sina’s complete assortment of resources remains unknown, but several tools may help them block keywords quickly and efficiently. Sina most certainly relies on its own technology to enhance its keyword control. As protests began in Haimen, certain keywords related to the protest reached the #4 spot on Sina’s top-10 list of popular topics.¹¹³ If the initial blocking of the keyword “Haimen” (海门) was not the result of an official directive, then Sina’s censors may have been tipped off by the popularity of certain keywords on their own site.

In the same fashion, Sina could also receive tips from paid-government commentators, who have been known to report suspicious content to the proper authorities. These may be precisely the users referred to by Sina editor Chen Tong who are “constantly reporting problematic content” to the attention of Sina staff.

More precise knowledge of the timing of keyword control might provide greater insight into keyword control. For example, in the case of the unblocking on Wukan on the 19th and Haimen on the 21st, it is unclear whether keywords were unblocked just before, after, or in unison with the release of government statements. Unblocking after a statement would decrease the likelihood of a directive and increase the likelihood of independent action by Sina. Simultaneous unblocking or blocking occurring before the release of an official statement would increase the likelihood of a directive. Any unblocking occurring just before a statement is released is of most interest and would stand as the strongest, and most intriguing, evidence of directives. In this case, it would seem that after an official position has been established by government authorities, word is sent to the appropriate media outlets for publishing. Traditional media outlets take time to prepare and publish a story, but Sina, it would seem, could respond to the directive with the push of a button. If Sina’s unblocking comes before an official statement, it would seem that unblocking of keywords could act as an early warning to any observers that government actors are about to release their, possibly altered, position.

112 “...daily meetings to discuss the latest government orders listing new topics and sensitive keywords that must either be monitored or deleted depending on the level of sensitivity; and finally, systems through which both editors and users are constantly reporting problematic content and bringing it to the attention of company censors”

113 ‘Haimen quyu dianchang huanbao shou zhiyi Huaneng ji Huadian xiangmu huo shou yingxiang’ in STCN.com, via JRJ.com, 21 December 2011, viewed on 2 May 2012, <http://stock.jrj.com.cn/2011/12/21021211879195.shtml>

5.2 The legacy of Wukan and Haimen and new media control campaigns

Some speculated that Wukan might be, in the words of one journalist, “the spark to set the prairie ablaze.”¹¹⁴ Within China, some began talking of a “New Peasant Movement”, especially in Sina’s microblogs. Acclaimed researcher of Chinese peasant movements Professor Yu Jianrong of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences made multiple references to the term in posts on Sina, which have since been deleted. Outraged by Sina’s control actions, Yu and other Chinese intellectuals left Sina for other blogging platforms.¹¹⁵

Interestingly, some villages have taken up the name of Wukan in their struggles with local government. In mid-January, the Baiyun district of Guangzhou, Guangdong protested against land grabs and corruption in front of the Guangzhou city government building, threatening to turn the incident into a “second Wukan.”¹¹⁶ Local officials promised to respond to their claims the following month. Beginning on February 1st, two villages in Zhejiang, Panhe East and West, joined in protests against local government land grabs.¹¹⁷ According to the testimony of one villager, those who were speaking out against the government online were arrested by police. The local government made promises to rectify the situation, but villagers remained highly skeptical. Though there remains a chance that new protests and new political strategies may provide new political models, it seems that Wukan has turned to be the latest exception rather than the new rule.

It remains to be seen whether Wukan will indeed “set the prairie ablaze”. While it can be difficult to forecast the likelihood of civil unrest, the vast networks of institutions of control, on the internet and in society at large, shows no signs of weakening. The Chinese government has already exerted tremendous effort into controlling the internet, which should be expected to continue in the foreseeable future. Microblog control has

114 Josh Chin, ‘Wukan Elections the Spark to Set the Prairie Ablaze?’, in *The Wall Street Journal China Real Time Report*, 1 February 2012, viewed on 2 May 2012, <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2012/02/01/china-wukan-elections-the-spark-to-set-the-prairie-ablaze/>

115 These posts have since been deleted, but I have personally saved records of his posts from that time. Yu’s account has since been restarted via an application from Sougou which forwards his posts to other accounts.

116 ‘Guangzhou land rally erupts amid key meeting’, in *South China Morning Post*, 18 January 2012, viewed on 7 February 2012, <http://www.scmp.com/article/990414/guangzhou-land-rally-erupts-amid-key-meeting>

117 ‘Zhejiang Villagers Protest Land Grabs’, via NTD Television, 7 February 2012, viewed on 7 February 2012, http://english.ntdtv.com/ntdtv_en/news_china/2012-02-07/Zhejiang-Villagers-Protest-Land-Grabs.html

not slackened in recent months, if anything, it has intensified, and tactics of control have become increasingly sophisticated.¹¹⁸

The near future of media control also depends on the future of politically sensitive issues in China. Since the beginning of 2012, the CDT database of sensitive keywords has recorded nearly 350 keywords that have been blocked. The material covers a wide range of politically sensitive issues, most of which are not related to mass incidents similar to Wukan or Haimen. There seems to be no lack of politically sensitive issues in China; those interested in keyword control and media campaigns will invariably have no shortage of research material in the foreseeable future.

In recent months, the most dramatic and politically important subjects of media control came with the downfall and subsequent purge of Chongqing party secretary Bo Xilai. This event triggered a massive media control campaign, which included the blocking of at least 30 keywords over the course of several months.¹¹⁹ Interestingly, both Sina and Tencent, China's two biggest microblogging platforms, simultaneously blocked the entire commenting features on their sites for three days.¹²⁰ As for keyword control, several key terms were blocked, unblocked, and reblocked as the situation unfolded. The tenuous status of Chongqing police chief, Wang Lijun, who allegedly sought shelter at an American consulate, made him a delicate topic in the Chinese media and on Sina's microblogs. His name changed status between blocked and unblocked at least 6 times before remaining unblocked, while the term "American consulate" changed 5 times and remains blocked to this day. The name Bo Xilai also changed status 5 times over the course of several months; his name remained blocked on the day of this publication.

Other notable instances of media control include the case of dissident lawyer Chen Guangcheng, who escaped from extralegal house arrest to the American embassy in Beijing. The incident, which included the blocking of around 20 keywords, also proved challenging to control; an article in the Washington Post unveiled possible confusion and discord in the media campaign on Chen.¹²¹ Beijing newspapers initially unleashed a coordinated and vicious attack on the American embassy. One of the most derisive pieces was released as an editorial by the Beijing Daily newspaper on May 4th. The article

118 Recent experiments with a "user credit point system", docking user's points for spreading, "untrue information", are reported in brief here: Josh Chin, 'Censorship 3.0? Sina Weibo's New "User Credit" Points System', in *Wall Street Journal China Real Time Report*, 29 May 2012, viewed on 1 June 2012, <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2012/05/29/censorship-3-0-sina-weibos-new-user-credit-points-system/>.

The Chinese government also struggled to implement a "real name registration" system, which would have required users to provide their personal identity numbers, verifying their identity as a Chinese citizen and potentially subjecting them to increased liability for things expressed online. Bill Bishop is an experienced commentator on the Chinese internet, its politics and regulation. Here is a short piece highlighting Sina's resistance to Beijing's ambitious policies, showing the "negotiation" process noted by David Bandurski (see footnote 29): Bill Bishop, 'Sina Admits It Has Not Complied With Weibo Real Name Registration Rules', in *Digicha*, 28 April 2012, viewed on 5 May 2012, <http://digicha.com/index.php/2012/04/sina-admits-it-has-not-complied-with-weibo-real-name-registration-rules/>.

119 Several keyword include variations on the name Bo Xilai, the name of Chongqing police Chief Wang Lijun, Bo's wife Gu Kailai as well as the name of British businessman Neil Heywood, who was allegedly murdered at the behest of Gu.

120 Didi Tang, 'China lifts microblog controls that sparked outcry', via Associated Press, 3 April 2012, 20 May 2012, <http://news.yahoo.com/china-lifts-microblog-controls-sparked-outcry-093717415.html>

121 Keith B. Richburg, 'Chinese newspaper apologizes for anti-Chen, anti-U.S. editorial', in *The Washington Post*, 5 May 2012, viewed on 7 May 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/chinese-newspaper-apologizes-for-anti-chen-anti-us-editorial/2012/05/05/gIQAxkNu2T_story.html

was met with an intense backlash from Chinese netizens, and the term “Beijing Daily” was blocked on Sina’s microblogs on the day of the article’s release. The following day, the Beijing Daily made a strange and unexpected post on its Sina microblog account, featuring a picture of a sad clown, smoking a cigarette with the message: “In the still of the deep night, removing that mask of insincerity, we say to our true selves, ‘I am sorry.’ Goodnight.” According to David Bandurski, “the editorials may have had the unintended effect of drawing more attention domestically to the Chen Guangcheng case than leaders wished.”¹²² Bandurski went on to say that the debacle may be “one of the most high-profile failures of Party propaganda we have on record.” The term “Beijing Daily” remained blocked for several days,¹²³ but was found to be unblocked by May 15th.

While sensitive issues like the Bo Xilai and Chen Guangcheng incidents must be handled as they arise, labor unrest, as mentioned before, is subject to constant control on Sina’s microblogs. Interestingly, the media control campaign around labor unrest, one of the most consistently volatile political issues in China, engenders consistent silence. The term “strike” is one term that is permanently blocked in Sina’s search feature. Consequently, strikes and other labor actions, undoubtedly one of the most common forms of civil unrest, do not receive much coverage in the Chinese press at large.

5.3 Are “control and resistance” significant?

This study illustrates keyword control and other microblog control efforts on the front lines of a very real “guerrilla war for the web” between netizens who want to share and discuss information and a government who seeks to control them.

Some, however, question the significance of government control of the internet. China scholar James Liebold rejects the way most researchers approach these issues.¹²⁴ He believes researchers need to step outside of the “control/resistance” and acknowledge that the internet itself can have negative effects on civil society. In short, Liebold holds that “the Sinophone blogosphere is producing the same shallow infotainment, pernicious misinformation, and interest based ghettos that it creates elsewhere in the world.”

Undoubtedly, there are vast amounts of apolitical, vulgar, or harmful content on the internet in China, but that, of course, can be said of the internet in nearly any country. While Liebold points out an additional dimension of the political, or apolitical, nature of internet, his critique of the “control/resistance” paradigm includes certain misunderstandings, which, when examined, only reinforce the significance of control in the Chinese internet. One should not underestimate the power of propaganda and control to strip the internet of elements that challenge authority.

Liebold is correct to be concerned that the internet can actually increase state power: “without free media and civic organizations that can openly criticize those in power, net surfing can actually strengthen the ruling party and its elite.” The internet itself may

122 Ibid.

123 The CDT database’s first recorded “Beijing Daily” as blocked on the 8th of May, while the *Washington Post* article reports the term was blocked on May 4th, the day the article was released. Perhaps we can assume the term remained blocked from a period of time, through at least May 8th and was unblocked by May 15th at the latest.

124 James Liebold, ‘Blogging Alone: China, the Internet, and the Democratic Illusion?’, in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume 70, Issue 04, November 2011, pp 1023–1041.

in fact contribute to China's notorious "resilient authoritarianism", but one would be remiss not to consider authoritarianism, and resistance to it, as legitimate perspective for researching internet control in China. If control and resistance were not a crucial factor for state power, the state would have little reason to dedicate such massive resources to controlling its citizens.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has placed the Chinese government efforts to control both the media and the general population in the context of specific media campaigns in response to particular politically sensitive issues; keyword control over the Wukan and Haimen incidents demonstrate a key aspect of Sina's established role in government media campaigns. Sina's own fate is inextricably tied to its ability to comply with government media control initiatives, both internalizing systems of control with its own monitoring efforts and responding to external imperatives through directives. While the power of netizens to share information and debate public issues has changed, their successes should be understood in the context of the tactics, forces and battle lines in the very real "guerrilla war for the web".

Analyzing keyword control, and other forms of microblog control, offers valid evidence of the close coordination between government media campaigns and Sina's microblog controls actions. Compelling trends between the two reveal the tactical logic behind media control campaigns. Blocking keywords when politically sensitive issues arise gives government officials time to construct their position, while attempting to smother independent discussion and spread of information. Unblocking keywords opens space for the propaganda campaign at a time that best suits the government once a position has been established.

These correlations build a strong case for the existence of coordinated directives from government institutions to media outlets, ranging from newspapers to online social media. The end of the blackout in Wukan, for example, showed that Sina's unblocking of a select number of keywords coincided directly with the core content of the Shanwei prefecture's statement released at the same time, the two acts thus reversing a nationwide policy of silence in traditional news media and stifled access to information in online media. With clearer knowledge of the exact timing of keyword control with respect to the release of government statements, observers could build more precise cases for or against government directives during media campaigns. One might even detect that some acts of keyword control, in particular the unblocking of a sensitive issue, occur just before the issuance of a government statement, perhaps acting as the first detectable signs of shifts in the government's position.

Microblogs should not be seen as isolated havens for netizens' discussion. Media campaigns operate through a web of media institutions under government control. In a media campaign, the government demonstrates impressive coordination of television, newspapers, online news and social media, embedding the nation's media deeply within the framework of government objectives.

Pervasive government power, in the media or on the ground, does not trivialize social conflict in China. Real battle lines exist in cyberspace between the words of netizens and the control tactics of microblog companies and the Chinese government, but these are also an extension of other more physical battle lines between police and protesters, the interests and privileges of those in positions of power and the rights and well-being of citizens.

Struggles in cyberspace and on the ground, while distinct, should be understood in relationship with one another. Furthermore, keyword control is more than merely a sign of a subservient online media company, but also de facto participation in deplorable acts of murder, theft, abuse and coercion. Control over the internet and other media

forms, in China and in the world at large, should be addressed with a similar level of seriousness.

Though some may doubt the significance of government media control efforts, evidence of the massive system of media control shows that it is of the utmost importance for the Communist Party. Party members have good reason to fear online media such as microblogs in a country with so much potential for political upheaval. The fears of the party are just as real as its own firm and audacious authority.

On the evening of December 21st, the day Wukan protesters cancelled their march and Haimen citizens clashed with riot police, Sina's microblog platform blocked the name "Zheng Yanxiong", Secretary of the Shanwei Communist Party Central Committee.¹²⁵ The previous day, he spoke at a press conference on the Wukan incident, seated next to Guangdong vice-secretary Zhu Mingguo.¹²⁶ There he delivered remarkably pithy statements about the party's frustration with civil unrest and the threatening presence of a more free and critical media, embodied by the foreign press. His revealing and inflammatory remarks were wildly circulated on Sina's microblogs; as a result, his name was blocked on the very same day.¹²⁷ Perhaps it is best to close with some excerpts from his speech:

“像这样负责任的政府你不指望，你指望国外几个烂媒体、烂报纸、烂网站！好坏都颠倒了。他们负什么责任啊？啥事干不了，巴不得你们打成一团，社会主义大乱，他们就高兴了。有事找政府，不请外人说短长。”

“You don't look to a responsible government like this one, instead you look to a few crappy foreign media, newspapers, and websites! You can't tell the good from the bad. What responsibility do they take? They don't do anything except stir the lot of you up, create turmoil for socialism, and then they're happy. If there's a problem, come to the government, don't air your dirty laundry to outsiders.”

“把我撤了又有什么好处？再派一个市委书记来，也不见得比郑[雁]雄好多少。”

“What's the point in removing me? Whoever they send to act as the central committee secretary won't necessarily be any better than Zheng Xiong.”

“现在只有一批人，感觉到一年比一年艰苦。谁呢？当干部的，包括我。以前的市委书记哪有这么累，甚么事都得管。权力一天比一天小，手段一天比一天少，责任一天比一天大；老百姓一天比一天胃口高，一天比一天聪明，一天比一天难管。”

“Today there is only one group of people who have it harder and harder every year. Who? The cadres, including me. In the past city party secretaries weren't so tired, and could take care of everything. Our power wanes day by day, our tools shrink day by day, our responsibilities grow day by day, the people's appetites grow day by day, they grow smarter and harder to manage day by day.”

125 One source who included a translation of Zheng Yanxiong's remarks was blogger William Ferris. William Ferris, 'Sina Weibo Stops Censoring "Haimen," Starts Censoring Name of Party Secretary Leading Wukan Negotiations', on Google+, 21 December 2011, viewed on 2 May 2012, <https://plus.google.com/u/0/10637898011121757454/posts/XunL9a6vNfU>

126 David Bandurski, 'Guangdong extends a firm hand to Wukan villagers', on *China Media Project*, 21 December 2011, viewed on 2 May 2012, <http://cmp.hku.hk/2011/12/21/17793/>

127 "'Wukan" on Sina Weibo: Unblocked as Protest Postponed [Update]', on *China Digital Times*, 21 December 2011, viewed on 2 May 2012, <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2011/12/wukan-on-sina-weibo-unblocked-as-protest-postponed/>

