

Weibo as an Ideological Space: Cultural Hegemony and Virtual Civil Society

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Abstract

Antonio Gramsci's Theories of Cultural Hegemony are used as a methodology to analyze ideological struggles on Weibo in China. Gramsci's argument is that the Civil Society is the field of negotiations between the state and individuals, where a governing power wins consent to its rule from those it subjugates. In China, the civil society is very weak but since 2012 Weibo has exercised some functions as a "virtual civil society". The author tries to elaborate the political and cultural functions of Weibo in Chinese political context.

Key Words: *Weibo, Ideological space, Hegemony, Civil Society, Reincarnation Party*

Introduction

Part I: Gramsci's Theory of Cultural Hegemony and The Problem of China's Civil Society

In recent years Antonio Gramsci's theory of "Cultural Hegemony" has become popular among the Chinese academia along with the rise of British Cultural studies. Gramsci was an Italian Marxist theorist and politician who was one of the most influential theorists in the New Left in Britain, especially on the so called "Birmingham School" headed by Stuart Hall. Hall modified Gramsci's theory and used it to analyze many social problems in Britain. "British Culture Studies" stems from the Birmingham School and now it is popular

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all over the world. It is a very important tool to integrate all kinds of "Postmodernisms" in China since 1990s and has triggered a heated debate about the theories of literature, culture and politics in China in 1990s. So, Gramsci's thought has been widely favored by scholars in China for its role in explaining the modern world.

However, Gramsci's "hegemony" is based on "civil society", which is the buffer between State and Individuals. Gramsci never talked about the civil society in China, but he once said, in Russia: "...the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between the State and Civil Society, and when the State trembled, a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks." (1971, p.238) Gramsci's great insight fits post-1949 China perfectly. He said that "The formula belongs to an historical period in which the great mass political parties and the great economic trade did not yet exist, and society was still, so to speak, in a state of fluidity from many points of view: greater backwardness of countryside, and almost complete monopoly of political and State power by a few cities or even by a single one (Paris in the case of France). A relatively rudimentary State apparatus, and greater autonomy of civil society from State activity; a specific system of military forces and of national armed service; greater autonomy of the national economies from the economy relations of the world market, etc." (1971, p.243) But the situation in China is different. Before CPC controlled China, it was impossible to build mature civil society. But in China there was a different

situation: the countryside might be backward politically, but there was no complete monopoly by cities because the rural area was home-rule, therefore the patriarchal clans in traditional Chinese agricultural society were the most influential power to manipulate the social affairs rather than the government. Meanwhile there were secret societies, various guilds and associations, religious sects and so on in both cities and countryside. Gramsci didn't study China's revolution and couldn't tell the differences between Russia and China, both of which were "awkward agricultural country".

As Gramsci said, "the same reduction must take place in the art and science of politics, at least in the case of the most advanced states, where 'civil society' has become a very complex structure and one which is resistant to the catastrophic 'incursions' of the immediate economic element (crises, depressions, etc.). The superstructures of civil society are like the trench-systems of modern warfare. (1971, p.235)", Therefore, Lenin was able to overthrow the Tsar Authority without dealing with the civil society in Russia. On the contrast, Mao Zedong's revolutionary strategy "the countryside surrounds the city" and policy of "agrarian revolution" aimed to "down with the exploiters", "down with the local tyrants and evil gentry" and "down with the Landlords". Mao launched many political movements to eliminate them. We can see that all these movements and policies were to destroy the civil society in China and he succeeded in conquering the civil society before he got political and military success in the "liberated areas". So, we understand that "civil society" not only exists in urban society but also in rural society, although Gramsci didn't mean it in

his works.

Then, since the establishment of PRC, all the potential political organizations were further destroyed mercilessly through several political movements including the famous “break the four olds”²during the Great Cultural Revolution. The CPC government used the label “feudalistic superstition” to get rid of all folk belief groups, which belonged to the “civil society” of the “old China”; the CPC government used “five black categories”³ to eliminate all different voices – not even dissents; the label “capitalist roader”⁴ to destroy any different voices inside the party. So, the State was the only political power in China. CPC was believed to be a “Great, Glorious and Correct” political party. It was not the “hegemony” as Gramsci described, but a “force” without “consent” of the people. The space left for “civil society” was minimized. There was no “trench” at all in China. We can understand why there were no many rebellions or even no much protestant voices during the great famine during the time 1969-1971.⁵ Therefore political life dominated everyday life totally in the Mao era, then during 1980s Deng Xiaoping came into power and the Open and Reform policy filled some fresh air to the everyday life. But still the civil society in China was very weak then.

² “Break the four olds” means “Break the old thoughts, old customs, old habits and old traditions.”

³ “Five black categories” means “the landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, bad persons and the political right wing”. The last one mainly means intellectuals.

⁴ “Capitalist roader” refers to “person in power within the party taking the capitalist road”. In the Great Cultural Revolution, Liu Shaoqi was declared as the “biggest Capitalist Roader”.

⁵ It is estimated that about 20 to 30 million people died of starve during the years 1958-1962.

Part II: Weibo Politics: Cyberspace as an Emerging “Virtue Civil Societies”?

With the advent of the information era, some of the “virtual communities” soon became the “virtue civil societies” and got enriched political significance. Firstly, on the BBS (Bulletin Board System), then on the Blog (Web Log) many people began to express their political ideas. Numerous Blog and BBS users transferred to Weibo, which is a Chinese microblogging website just like Twitter.

Since September 2009, the number of www.weibo.com users increased to 500 million (Ong, 2017), which is more than one third of the country’s population, and the active users are more than 46 million, as Sina.com has claimed (“Sina Weibo”, 2017). The Monthly active users in 2017 are above 300 million according to their annual report (please refer to figure 1), therefore Weibo is the largest social media in China.



Figure 1 Monthly Active Users from 2016 to Q2 2017 (Noonan, 2017)

According to the report, 77.8% of the users are those with higher

education background (refer to Figure 2), in other words they are believed to be the “cultural persons” or intellectuals.

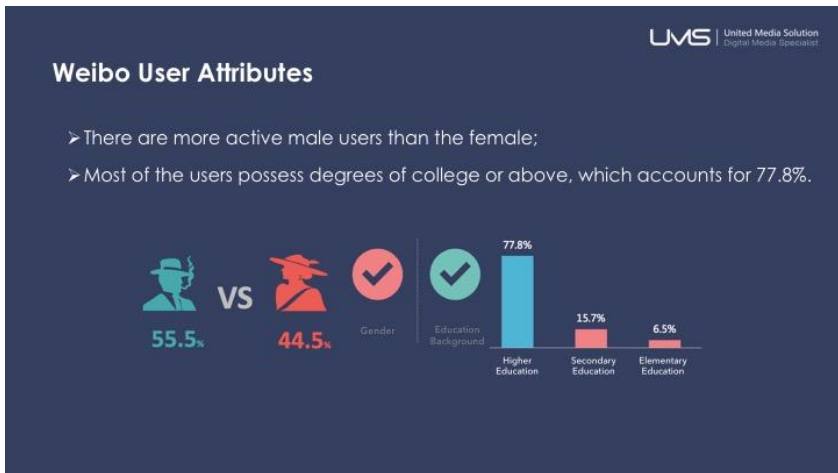


Figure 2 (BLOG, 2017)

Those people could be considered as “middle class” in China and the main “driving force” of the social transformation. However, as the report shows, the most popular topics are entertainment, finance & economics, education, comics & animation. (see figure 3)



Figure: 3

We cannot find the topics on “current politics” although it is believed to be one of the most influential channels of information distribution and ideological struggle (“Has Weibo really changed China?”, 2017). Some scholars borrowed the term we-media to refer to and has become a space full of political protesting, corruption exposing and ideological struggle, a substitute of “real civil society” as the “arena of hegemony”. Politically, Weibo has given a channel for some people to express dissent to the government and meanwhile became the base of so called democratic-constitute scholars in China. In all, the popularity of Weibo threatened the existing media hegemony of TVs, Newspapers and traditional News Websites.

The traditional ideological state apparatus, for example TV programs and newspaper declined rapidly. It is said that most of the highest CPC leaders have their own IDs on it (“President Xi’s first Weibo goes viral- Xinhua | English.news.cn”, 2017). All these forced the government to make tight control on the users, requiring

the “real name” registration in September 2017 (“China’s Twitter-like Weibo orders users to register real names”, 2017).

Therefore, we can hardly say that Weibo really makes a virtual “civil society” ---in Gramsci’s idea, the political society is the sphere of “force” but the “civil society” is the sphere of “consent” through “negotiation” – even on Weibo the power of state were still overwhelmingly dominant. Now that there were no “negotiations”, so the “political struggle” never stopped on Weibo – that’s a characteristic of “virtual civil society” that differs itself from the real one.

In Weibo, there are four main groups related to politics. The first is Public Intellectuals, most of whom are professors, scholars, journalists, lawyers and writers (for example, professor He Weifang from Beijing University; Mr. Pu Zhiqiang, a lawyer; Mr. Mao Yushi, an economists; Mr. Li Chengpeng, a former sports reporter). They want to “enlighten Chinese People” by spreading knowledge about democracy and politics. They are always under attack by both the right and left wings for various reasons. The leftists believe they are bought off by the USA government and criticize the CPC party with evil purpose while the rightists believe some of them work for the government to taut “imaginary hope”. The second group is called Wumao party or 50cents party (Wumao means 50 cents), which is an equivalence of “internet trolls”. It is the colloquial term for Internet commentators hired by Chinese authorities in an attempt to manipulate public opinion. It is said that they get 50cents per post. They are active in many public affairs. The third one is called as the “Reincarnation Party”. Of course, it’s is not a real political party,

and most of the members are from grass-root” although many professors, scholars and intellectuals disguised themselves in pseudo names as members of RP (Mr. Xiao Han, a vice professor from China University of Political Science and law is one of the most famous RP member and public intellectual). The metaphor, reincarnation, is a self-mocking name for those whose Weibo accounts are frequently deleted by Sina.com and have to re-register to get new ones. Usually, they’d like to add a number to their Weibo ID such as 2, 3 to show how many times they lost their account, as the title of William1, William2 and William3. There’s no accurate number of the party members because the frequent going and coming of them. Many people lost their patients and after many times of coming and going they gave up and never come back again. However, the so-called reincarnation party is the most active and most influential group in Weibo. Their motto is “To change China with Weibo”. Because of their frequent “reincarnation”, most of the IDs have only hundreds of followers. The RP exerted great influence on many public events. One of the famous example was their Internet mass hunting movement (in Chinese they called ‘human flesh search’). The first successful public opinion warfare they won happened in 2010, just one year after Weibo appeared. On October 16, 2010, a car accident happened in Hebei University, Hebei province, with one girl killed and the other seriously injured. The trouble maker was a young man who was tried to escape but was stopped by people. He shouted wildly that “my father is Li Gang, let me go!” Angry was aroused and the matter became out of control. The Weibo Reincarnation Party, bursting into great power,

their 'human flesh search' (of course the concerned people were not only RP members) began to work. Very soon the father, Li Gang was proved to be a deputy director of a public Security Bureau in Hebei Province. After that, the trouble maker was sentenced to six years in prison while the father was found a corruption ("Li Gang incident", 2017). Encouraged by such "victory", the reincarnation party put their eyes on all kinds of corruption and injustice events. Besides that, the RP members spread democratic ideas, calls for political changes. The fourth group is the military "volunteers", headed by Mr. Dai Xu, who is a retired Major Colonel. Their purpose is to eliminate all public intellectuals, all traitors to China, all those who are not satisfied with the CPC.

Part III: A War of Ideological Hegemony between RP and Fifty Cents Party: A Case Study

To sum up, the social media Weibo exercises part of the function of Civil Society in the war for "hegemony" to get "consent" of the people through public Opinion Warfare, but there were lack of "negotiations" among Wumao and RPs. The connotations of Gramsci's concepts have to be revised to some extent as I have mentioned above. Here is a case study of the "war of Hegemony", to make the features of "virtual civil society" more clearly. The word "war" is chosen to describe the event because it was just like a long-lasting tangled warfare among the four main political groups on Weibo. It was not a conflict between Wumao and RP members like before, but an "inside war" of the RPs caused by a

“conspiracy”⁶. Before the “war”, all the RP members are united tightly and the “50 cents” party denied admitting they are hired by the government; the public intellectuals were in relatively peaceful time without being attacked by other groups; the military power didn’t appear on Weibo. After the “war”, the ideological environment of Weibo has been greatly changed: the RP members split; the 50-cents party become “self-willing 50 cents” and they no longer disguise their purpose and identity; the public intellectuals began to be under fierce attack and threats, some of them were forced to leave Weibo (such as the said Mr. Xiao Han).

The story begins with an imaginary fraud. There is a Miss Grief who is said to be a woman with serious disease with no more than 25000 followers at that time. But her relations with Reincarnation Party members made her famous, and even worse, she was claimed to be a cheater. A person named Old Rainying and Grandpa Eight, both of whom were not well-known members of reincarnation party, were accused of being the chief members of Miss Grief’s fraud. Those who issued such accusation were headed by two persons named respectively as Male Repairer and Female Repairer: the ID of Male Repairer and Female Repairer. Mr. Repairer was once the icon of Weibo because his ID was deleted hundreds of times from 2009 to 2012. Some of his IDs could only live for several hours, therefore it’s difficult to find him, and because of that, he became a legend among RP members. The female Repairer is a person full of mysteries, who appeared in the year of 2013. In the beginning both of them denied to have known each other but soon

⁶ No one can prove it is a conspiracy although most of the RP members believe so.

the male and female Repairers began to join together to “beat the Cheaters”. They declared that Miss Grief’s pretend to be sick to cheat the followers to donate. Then more and more members got involved including those who didn’t know Ms. Grief at all, for example a famous dissent “Super Butcher”, who was arrested in 2015 two years later, and Mr. Not Changing, Mr. Eighth Day and Miss Beautiful Bird. Those persons had no relations with the matter at all but they believed the members of Questioning party were 50-cents party members in RP’s disguise: their true purpose was to “eliminate” the web-dissents by splitting the RP members. The Repairers knew very well the structure of the organizations of Weibo and they took advantage of the knowledge. If one key member was under question then most of his receivers may get involved: in this way, they got tens of thousands of IDs involved and stormed the whole Weibo.

Among the defenders of Ms. Grief there was a Miss Anti-violence and his god-father like person, Mr. Lin, who is a gem merchant. Both of whom was fiercely attacked by a very famous RP member, Mr. Jobs, who was the most famous member of RP and wrote many popular posts about democracy and freedom, but now he was very close to the Male and Female Repairers. Mr. Jobs accused Miss Anti-Violence and Mr. Lin of sex adultery and blackmailed him for great sum of money.

Now the two separated issues began to entangle: Miss Grief’s donation fraud and Miss Anti-Violence’s sex scandal. Thus, many more people got involved. Meanwhile, the Repairers went on to question other “cheaters” besides Miss Grief, most of them were

active members of RP. What made things worse was a Mr. Book Sea, publicly accused some of the active participant as “spies” who were hidden in RP and in the Beijing dissents. He declared some of the dissents were arrested and tortured in prison because the spies gave secret information to the government. That caused huge surge among the RP members, and the struggle escalated greatly: the past harmony among RP members was replaced by suspecting and attacking each other.

The online battle became off-line fight: some of the persons met and fought each other and such a situation lasted for a few months. Finally, some of them agreed to have a conversation face to face in Shanghai but with no results.

In such a chaos of Weibo, with disappointment, many members of RP left and never came again under the attack of other members. The RP camp declined greatly and the result was obvious: voices against the government were weakened because they were busy with back biting and fighting.

The battle lasted for almost one and a half year. Miss Grief, the core person of all events, was gradually forgotten by most of the participants, the discussions and quarrels moved from frauds to many of the serious problems although the struggles became fiercer and fiercer. When all believed that the battle would never end, the Repairers and his supporters were suddenly defeated and most of them chose to leave Weibo forever. Before Miss Repairer left, a real scandal happened. She persuaded some of her comrades to invest on her business and then disappeared forever with the money.

There are many reasons for their sudden collapse. Firstly, more

RP members suspect them and began to make “human flesh search”. Finally, they found that Mr. Repairer was not a Hong Kong citizen as he himself said, but a salesman who lived in Shenzhen. They even found that he was once selling porn movies to make profits. It is believed that he was not the real King of RP but a false one or was bought by the government. The female Repairer hidden deeply. Although she published some of her photos on Weibo, no one actually knew her or ever met her in real life, then she cheated her comrades large amount of money and left. The two leader’s defeat caused the failure of their battle. Some of the strong supporters of them, such as 13 Billion People, who is an experienced and intrepid social activist, began to change his attitude towards the other members of the group. Most of the supporters came back to the RP camp. The internal conflict caused many members to leave. Their supporters became less and less in number.

During the quarrels, the topics went beyond Ms. Grief or Miss Anti-violence’s fraud, and moved to some important politic issues: the differences and boundary line between public and private, the government’s liabilities to common people, the relations between democracy, law and human rights...and so on. Some famous public intellectuals played a key role in such transferring, because most of them are professors and experts on law, even some lawyers. These topics are so sensitive in China, maybe some of the important persons pulling the strings behind the scenes wouldn’t like them to continue. Thirdly, Mr. Super Butcher, an experienced social activist, tried to mediate different groups to appease the turbulence on internet, was under fierce attack by the Repairers’ group. He was

condemned and accused of many money-scandals but with no proof. That might irritate more and more unrelated influential IDs to defeat them.

Part IV: Moral Criticism: The Easier Way to Win Hegemony?

From the case above we can get some important elements to analyze: scandals of sex and blackmail, Spies and conspiracy, cheaters and traitors, fraud and money: all these elements are necessary to make it spread fast among the Weibo users. What's more, all of these elements have the implications of morality: moral attacks are more efficient, direct and attractive than debates on theoretical or political issues in China. The strategy of Repairers and their followers was very evident: eliminating those dissidents on Weibo by moral attack instead of trying to argue with them. If those person who are talking of democracy, freedom and institutionalism are nothing but cheaters, and if those democracies are just 'doing democracy business' to make money from those who "don't know the truth", then the democratic group, or RP, will lose their supreme status of morality and politics. It is to capture the moral hegemony as Gramsci said by destroying and eliminate the RPs' morality. For RP members, keeping their dignity and supremacy on morality is one of the reasons why they were concerned with the affairs so much. They knew that moral problems were fatal to them.

Sex blackmail, cheating and traitor stories are certainly moral scandals everywhere in the world. The spy stories were once used by the CPC government to show the enemies' evil, so the images of spy were always bad and evil. For many years after 1949, the

images of spies have not been handsome and intrepid James Bonds but ugly and mean persons like rats and mouse. They were assigned by the enemies to sabotage the process of socialism construction, murder the socialist and overthrow the “new China”. In the 1970s and 1980s, movies on the topic of hunting spies were very popular. Even the children play the game named “hunting spies”.

The so called RP party members are mostly online critics with no unity organizations, why did various political powers pay so much attention to them? There’s a political context for the Chinese government to worry about. There is a saying that “the lefter your position is, the safer you are; the righter you position is, the nobler you are”: those who show their loyalty to the Communism government may get more assurance of security, by contrast those who attack the CPC government own the supreme of morality. Of course, the indications of “right” and “left” are quite different from western categories: in China, the “left” refers to those who advocate the CPC government or Marxism; the “right” refers those who call for democracy and constitutionalism. So, to destroy the dissidents by moral attack may be the easiest way to handle them. But, the results were to everyone’s surprise: the RP won the battle at last. The Repairers ended up with a bad reputation and were believed to be Wumao: if so, their hope to destroy the RP’s moral leadership failed. However, the story continued after the Repairers disappeared on Weibo. And the battle for ideological hegemony lasts in a different way, and finally the RP were almost destroyed in a way no one had envisioned.

In the many years of revolutionary experience, the Communist Party's success owed a lot to those who "work inside the enemies", the "underground Party members". They disguised themselves as the KMT party officials and got secret information from inside. The repairers were believed to be 50cents Party member who disguised themselves as RP members. That's part of the Revolutionary tradition. No one is sure whether the Repairers are working for the government, especially when the female one disappeared suddenly. If she is hired by the government, it's impossible for her to cheat so many members of 50 cents Party and ran away. So, her real identity is still a secret till now. Repairers, if they are 50 cents party, are really the invisible enemies hidden inside the "revolutionary troop" and who "work inside the enemies". The battles inside and outside the RPs tired some of them and they are nearly overwhelmed. Although it's easier for the veterans of RP members to refute the enemies' funny viewpoints, such simultaneous attacks from within and without make them tired of dealing with.

Part V: The Battle of Triangle Hill⁷: Opening Another Front in the Ideological Hegemony Struggle

The turbulence caused by both Repairers appeased suddenly with a shameful defeat by RP. Some of their supporters remained on Weibo but lost their receivers and influence. Meanwhile, the RP's constitution was greatly undermined. During the struggle caused

⁷ The Battle of Triangle Hill, also known as Operation Showdown or the Shangganling Campaign was a protracted military engagement during the Korean War, November 25, 1952.

by Repairers, some of the former or present army men began to appear on Weibo, who called themselves patriots and “Hawkish members in the Army”. They announced that they would fight and “win the Triangle Hill battle on Internet” and “Occupy the ideological heights”. Two of the representatives were Senior Colonel Dai Xu and Major General Luo Yuan: both of them are real names. As military experts, they are frequently invited by CCTV and other media platforms as guest host in military programs. Dai Xu even leads a group of IDs named “Army of Volunteers” who hunted for “public intellectuals and traitors to China”. The battle for eliminating the RP continues, but their main enemies stopped disguise themselves like before, although there are still some hidden enemies who disguise themselves as PR. The “web commentators”, official title for 50 cent party, don’t need to hide their identity anymore except some ones with secret tasks. The government and organizations who employ them require them to be “in the right and self-confidence”, to be as proud as a 50 cent-party members. The government gives open training courses for the web commentators all over the whole country, from central to local institutes and universities. The battle becomes a “frontline battle” with RPs and Public intellectuals. They own the absolute numerical superiority: more than 10 million to tens of thousands.

Meanwhile, the division and conflict between so called democratic groups is continuing, for example the quarrel between Mr. Ye Gongmo, a once supporter of the infamous Repairers and famous intellectual, and Mr. Li Jianmang, a Holland Chinese became very fierce in November 2015. The voices from grass-root

RP members weakened. The “virtual civil society” would be destroyed before it really come into being. So, after the secret underground war lost, the war became a front war: the opposite camps fight each other directly without disguises. The exact numbers of the “50-cent army” is unknown, and many are employed by separate organizations under different job titles. According to a Hong Kong newspaper, the communist youth league issued a file in 2015 which required to hire 10.5 million web commentators, including 4 million university students. That’s a great number trying to swing the public opinions. So, the “battle of triangle hill” is no problem to win for them----most of the web-commentators are not good at writing posts but their huge number is good enough to overwhelm the weak voices of the PRs and public intellectuals. Ironically, the government used the “tactics of human sea” in the web-battles again like they did in the war times.

In China, there is a special tradition of revolutionary literature. Historically, since the foundation of People’s Republic of China in 1949, many military terms came into the everyday words, the words like “war” “battle” “fight” “victory” referring to ordinary tasks without connection to war, for example “assault of fortified positions” to mean accomplishing the difficult part of a task or mission, “to start a battle” to mean starting a task. That’s mainly because during 1949-1979 most of the literature works, movies, music and other artistic works are about revolutionary war stories. Those words sound quite common to Chinese people, but to the PRs, the word “war” here was quite serious and even quite dangerous threat because they are real army man. And the so called

“volunteer army on the web” worried them greatly. The so called “army” publicized a name list every year about public intellectuals and “traitor to China” and threaten to “bury them alive”; they attacked the RPs by making their personal information public (names, address and family members, ect.); they took action to give pressures to universities and research institutes to cancel the lectures of some professors and lawyers. Therefore, they were not only “fight on the web” but also “fight in the real life”.

Part VI: Conclusion: the problem of civil society in China

Weibo, as a “we media”, has become the channel to communicate virtual and reality. For example, a famous star, Ms. Yao Chen has 78.5 million receivers; meanwhile the number of Part Member of CPC is 87.89 million; the circulation of *People’s Daily* is less than 3 million. Some of the cadres worry that Yao Chen’s words are twenty times of influence that of the largest newspaper in China. So, it is understandable that the CPC government wants to “win the ideological battle on Weibo”. But, to handle such a huge number of users is not an easy matter so they take various ways to get the “cultural hegemony” on website.

Therefore, Weibo has become the “civil society” for winning “hegemony of knowledge and moral”. There are some characteristics of “civil society” as Gramsci explained. The story of the Repairers events we mentioned above could be believed to be a trial struggle for the government to get “moral and intellectual leadership” on Weibo, but after their failure, obviously the authority began to lose patience. Then the “battle of triangle hill”

happens, when the army men appeared to “win the battle of public opinion”. Although the influence of Weibo can’t be neglected for the great number of users in China, it hardly can constitute a “civil Society”.

Different from new rising WeChat⁸ and old style QQ⁹, Weibo lost its social contact function. Webchat and QQ are for private circles, but Weibo has become a public platform. Most of the “friends” on Weibo don’t know each other in real life. They come together only because their similar interests. Although the government requires all the users to register real names, it seems very difficult to handle hundreds of millions of IDs. Till now it is the only ideal channel for expressing dissent political ideas in China. Weibo is believed to be the buzzer zone for political tensions. If Weibo can be made good use of by the authorities, it will be a very efficient way for the government to construct a public mood adjustment system and deepen the political reform. It’s good for Weibo to become a virtual civil society than a battle field: the government should untie the ropes on Weibo and other web social products to cultivate the real civil society and to make preparation for the further political reforms.

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⁸ WeChat is a multi-functional Chinese social media mobile application software developed by Chinese company Tencent.

⁹ Tencent QQ, also known as QQ, is an instant messaging software service developed by the Chinese company Tencent.

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