

Purged out of Chinese Internet:
An Oral History of Individuals Who Experienced
“Digital Death” on Social Media

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Prologue

2018 was an eventful year for both me and the world that I am in. After a series of formal or informal farewell parties over hot pots, I embarked on an exchange program at University of Maryland, College Park. It'd be the first time for me to visit the United States, after microdosing “American-style education” for two and a half years in Beijing. I was in my junior year – three semesters short for my bachelor’s degree in Communications, but nowhere near any clear direction on what would be next. I had achieved nothing substantial that I could put on my resumé, except from a small pile of “best debater” medals and trophies.

I was 21, still figuring it out, fresh off the plane from a chilly city to another; “too old for blending in but too young to sit down under,” I thought to myself. A series of changes of my physical and social-political environment amounted to a compound experience that embodied a Heideggerian “thrownness” – feeling alienated and conditioned in a rather arbitrary new reality. A Republican political megastar who championed xenophobic rhetoric rode the wave of populism in the U.S., an aspiring dictator at home who removed the term limit for president, and women coming forward online speaking up against sexual assault in both places. The wind on two sides of the Pacific seemed to be blowing in their own directions, but somehow in a rhythmic sync, creating a whirl in between that absorbed me deeper in.

At the time, Chinese nationalism had started to surge, together with the narrative for superpower rivalry. Just a year before I arrived at University of Maryland, Yang Shuping, valedictorian and fellow Chinese study-abroad student, made headlines in China for her speech praising freedom of speech in the U.S. Yang became a victim of the bigotry of Chinese nationalists overnight, berated by state media, enraging chauvinists and many fellow study-abroad students alike over her “Air is fresher in America” comment. The culture of

surveillance and conformity permeated China, and extended to the overseas Chinese community that I was in.

At a time when I craved content that would help me make sense of the changing world and a space to process what was going on around me, Weibo became the place where I found solace. I became deeply invested in online public debates, and contrary to the common belief, found clarity instead of chaos, reassurance instead of confusion, courage instead of escape. Figures like Professor Po-Chung Chow, Fang Kecheng and Lin Yao inspired me to pursue what I believe in, despite popular sentiment and real obstacles.

It was then heartbreaking to see the posts, words that people poured so many thoughts into, going missing, eventually turning into a staggering exclamation sign – “the content you visit no longer exists.” And then they came for the people – familiar profile pictures went grey one by one, as if little fires were being put out in the wilderness. In 2019, eventually but not unexpectedly, the Weibo account that I had used for more than 4 years was suspended. The online community as I knew it was hardly the same – people were suspended, forced out, or left voluntarily out of despair or despise. Even most of the content, from selfies, late night rants, heartfelt reposts to thoughtful public engagements, were mostly gone, like they have never existed before.

Weibo’s algorithm, just like the inner workings of Chinese censorship, was a black box. However, the individual experiences using it, working around it and against it were fresh and alive, waiting to be documented. For my thesis project, I decided to focus on 7 narrators’ individual stories about their now-defunct online identity, their experiences of having fun, performing resistance, processing grief related to their account suspension, all to constitute a collective narrative of those who attempted to make a mark but eventually were shut down by the state apparatus.

If being at least partially erased or silenced is just a cold hard reality that constitutes what “living in China as a Chinese” means today, it is my hope that more experiences of being systemically erased and silenced can be preserved, gathered and can contribute to the understanding of living under censorship, or in Margret Hillenbrand’s words, a “cryptocracy” where negative histories are a lot of times rendered into “zombie half-lives” that hang over the present.

Introduction

As social media platforms become increasingly important sites for civic engagement and creative expression in China (Yang), the Chinese government cracks down on social media with a comprehensive, stringent, and sophisticated set of censorship tactics to curb political discussions deemed undesirable, with an increasing focus on shutting down individuals who are vocal on sensitive matters. Outspoken public opinion leaders, who serve as the “non-party” thought leaders (Gallager & Miller), with their crucial role in information dissemination and ability to sway the public, thus become the foremost subject of user-targeted censorship: account suspension and the subsequent deplatformization.

Deplatformization, usually referred to on Chinese web as “account bombing” (*zha hao*), is the act of an online platform that systemically denies a user the infrastructural services needed to function within its ecosystem. Through oral history interviews of 6 Chinese public opinion leaders across platforms, this study seeks to understand the implications of account suspension and deplatformization for those individuals -- what kind of emotional and behavioral response censorship evoked, how it shaped these users’ affective relationship with social media, and the reflexivity and agency they exhibit engaging in public discourse.

Theory

Censorship in China has been a hot-button topic in academia – its mechanisms, effectiveness, evasions and implications, as the country’s information authorities created a vast and tentacular system “unprecedented in recorded world history” (King et al., 2013) While a lot of early studies on censorship focus on the interplay between state and traditional mass media, more recent literature on the topic has been directed towards social media, demonstrating its transformative power on how information is created, disseminated and consumed. In 2009, one year after Twitter was banned in China, Sina Weibo was founded in China as an instantaneous microblogging service, with a mission to fill in the void.

For years, Weibo was celebrated as the digital infrastructure that would give birth to the closest form of a democratic life Chinese general public could enjoy. “To pay attention” (*guan zhu*), a feature started by Weibo, took from the culture of “to crowd around” (*wei guan*) in the BBS era and emphasized its active, instead of passive and apathetic aspects. *Southern Weekly*, a liberal-leaning newspaper famously ran a feature on Weibo titled “To pay attention is power, onlookers change China,” acknowledging its active role shaping public discourse and advancing civic awareness in the country (Guo, 166).

The rhetoric was accompanied by the once-popular voices of Chinese techno-optimists, who contended that digital technology, including social media, would drive the democratization process of authoritarian regimes. The narrative did not prevail for long, as the rise to prominence of digital communication was accompanied by the tightening of social media censorship in China. As Xi Jinping became the president of China in 2012, the Cyberspace Administration of China was formed to champion “digital governance,” which vastly reduced the autonomy and spontaneity of China’s digital public sphere (Creemers, 2013). Nick Srnicek defined platforms are essentially digital infrastructures that enable two or

more groups to interact (2017). Weibo, as a platform at least initially designed for “witnessing,” exposes users in the vast number of posts, likes, reposts and comments, as well as the ever-mutating force of subjection named censorship. As Weibo gained more political leverage and negotiation power, it was also put under draconian censorship that is multi-level and systemic (King et al., 2013). In 2012, mandatory real-name registration was implemented on Weibo, enforcing that all accounts to be attached to their users’ their real identity (Nip & Fu, 2016).

In the present day, encountering censorship has become a common shared experience among those who use the internet in China. Some experiences are more direct: posts and reposts are directly removed, keywords become unsearchable, comment sections of certain posts get closed...while others are more subtle and often go without being noticed, serving as more of a “tax” instead of a blanket ban on information to users, by means of distraction and diversion (Roberts). Empirical evidence collected by Roberts proved that users tend to resist the influence more when they notice that censorship has happened, while falling prey to it more easily when they don’t realize the censorship in the content they consume, or if it could be simply explained away. Further, Roberts found that visible censorship leads to a surge of discussion of sensitive topics, as most ordinary users do not report being fearful but will instead report to be indifferent and angry after experiencing censorship.

Roberts’ findings opened up space for further inquiry about the effect of censorship on individuals: if being cognizant of the fact that censorship has happened during online experiences led to resistance, does more direct contact with censorship incite a more significant rebellious attitude? The stance was validated by a study by Zhu and Fu, contending that the presence of censorship constitutes a threat to freedom and invoke psychological reactance to go against the will of censorship to restore freedom.

Among the direct, noticeable measures of censorship, Hui Fang and Shangwei Wu distinguished user-targeted censorship from content-targeted censorship in their recent study of “account bombing” in China – while content-targeted censorship seeks to remove the specific post or content that is deemed sensitive, user-targeted censorship seeks to remove the person who produces that content permanently from the platform, and usually includes but is not limited to censorship of provocative opinions, relentless criticism or activism (2022). Thus, “account bombing” (*zha hao*), or deplatformization, could be considered the most intimate way an individual experiences censorship, as their total online identity and presence are permanently removed. Based on the real-name authentication system, a thorough deplatformization could even prevent any effort by the banned user to come back.

There has been very limited study of the phenomenon of deplatformization, both in the field of China censorship studies and in the Western context. Censorship, after all, is a difficult subject to study because it is “intended to go undetected” (Roberts). The exact process and casualties of censorship are thus mostly understood from the occasional emergence of data leaks, whistleblowers, or from the keen eyes of savvy observers who immerse themselves in the ever-changing social media content feed. Multiple influential studies have preceded the focus on the human reaction to censorship, suggesting three major models of reaction from users: “backfire effect”, “chilling effect”, and “phoenix effect”. The aforementioned “backfire effect” highlights the resistance and radicalization encounter with censorship can trigger, “chilling effect” posits that censorship is effective in making people aware that they are being watched, thus engaging in self-censorship (Jiang & Zhao, 2016). The “phoenix effect”, on the other hand, shines light on the transformative aspect of the experience of being censored, arguing that account deletions will create more skilled and strategic resisters (Finkel 2015).

The term chilling effect was coined originally in relation to the US Constitution to describe a case where the presence of surveillance deterred an individual's practice of their First Amendment rights (Schauer, 1978; Tsui, 2003 as cited by Zhu & Fu). In the Chinese context, it is used to refer to the discouraging effect censorship has on users, prompting them to withdraw from speaking out about undesired topics, i.e. self-censor. Min Jiang found out that Chinese censorship has been effective in making users feel watched, instilling a chilling effect in them (2016). Backfire effect, also known as "Streisand effect", characterize the rebellious reaction that inspire users to go opposite way of censorship, by consuming more censored information or speaking out on a sensitive subject matter (Roberts, 2020; Hobbs & Roberts, 2018). In a study of Weibo posts on Hong Kong Anti-ELAB protest by Yuner Zhu and King-Wa Fu, it was found that when users tend to experience "chilling effect" when censorship happens in a global environment, while react in "backfire effect", when censorship happens in people they know or themselves (2020). The study also showed that these effects or not monolith but can exist simultaneously in a compounding manner.

Phoenix effect remain the most under-studied category in censorship, as it was proposed in the context of state repression of Jewish communities in the Holocaust (Finkel, 2022). While chilling effect and backfire effect propose a binary attesting to the effectiveness of censorship, phoenix effect proposed that exposure to selective repression was crucial (though likely not the only way) to transition into successful mobilization and sustained resistance. In the context of Chinese censorship, much work has been done to illustrate the creativity and vital internet culture on Chinese internet, despite the stringent censorship (Guo, 2021; Xie, Foxman & Xu, 2021).

Another thing missing from the conversation is the effect of account suspension and deplatformization on public opinion leaders, a group defined by not just their critical

influence in public discussion but their ardent engagement with the site. In his book *Controlling the Internet in China*, Fan Dong noted that the top-elite-mass-follow form of control alleviates the management burden of the government (2012). In other words, while ordinary users make up the most of public discussion, their power in the conversations are limited. It is the small portion of influential opinion leaders that has the ability to set the agenda of public discussions (Nip & Fu, 2016).

In a 2021 study that pulls from leaked government documents and Weibo's information regulation manuals, Mary Gallagher and Blake Miller found that content is less relevant than commonly thought in Weibo's censorship. While "nobodies" tend to get a freer rein, influential non-party opinion leaders are faced with stricter oversight (2021). By controlling selected few that wage more power on social media, the government got to "control the virality of content, the influence of individuals and the ability of discussion on social media to mobilize and incite" (Gallagher and Miller, 2021).

It made sense, then, to also examine the phoenix effect on influential opinion leaders – has the exposure to user-targeted censorship equipped them with better skillset to resist censorship in the future? Further, what are the reflexivity these individuals generate from their experience with censorship?

All the three effects act on a personal level and evoke visceral emotional responses. Although the idea of an affective public sphere on social media has been studied by many in the western context (Berlant, 2008; Papacharissi, 2015), it still remains underexplored in the Chinese context, possibly because "emotions may be considered fleeting, but beliefs are more fixed, while ideology expresses conviction versus the overpowering, albeit occasionally ephemeral, sway of affect (Papacharissi, 2015)." While Weibo has shown a similar function of providing space for public contention compared with its western counterparts, it is more

state-directed (Cheek et al, 2018) and also holds its own characteristics: “the hybridity of public and private in the Chinese public sphere highlights a dimension of state governance (Shao & Wang, 2016). Huang (1993) describe the phenomenon as “the third realm”, highlighting the state-public interaction in constructing Chinese public sphere.

Taking all these in consideration, the following research questions are asked:

- 1) What are the emotional/behavioral effects of account suspension/deplatformization on public opinion leaders?
- 2) How do the public opinion leaders’ desire to speak on social media change due to account suspension/deplatformization?
- 3) How has deplatformization impacted their perception of digital identity in relation to their offline identity?

Methodology

In order to collect data for this study, I conducted in-depth oral history interviews with 6 participants who have had their Weibo accounts suspended. The criteria for inclusion in this study were as follows:

- Participants must be Chinese and have experienced account suspension on Weibo
- Participants must have at least 3k followers before their first account bombing experience and have some influence in public opinions.
- Participants must be willing to participate in an in-depth interview

The interviews were conducted in Mandarin and were audio recorded with the participants' consent. The recordings were then transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

For decades, oral history has been credited as a method that empowers the individuals who are marginalized and silenced (Thompson, 2006). Compared to interviews of other forms, which also involves two people in dialogue, oral history negates the positivist tradition of removing oneself from the interviewee in pursuit of objectivity and places special emphasis on sharing authorship with the narrator. In Kathryn Haynes' words, oral history "deal more broadly with a person's past, and range widely over many different topics."

However, this doesn't mean that an oral history method simply spans a longer period of one's life or wider array of issues. For a study like mine, which highlights a very specific snippet of one's life, oral history allows me to probe deeper into a momentary experience, by relying on open-ended questions and deep listening that brings out individual reflexivity about what happened to them. Thus, I design my interview guide in a way that maximize

discovery, description and interpretation, and choose to riff on those motifs in the interviews to enable deeper understanding.

I acquire my interviewees mainly through my own social circle. Some of them I know personally, some of them were introduced to me by someone that I know personally. There are also ones that I only know of before through usage of Weibo, and only got into contact through email.

The fact that I am friend or introduced by a friend to my interviewees, and my sympathy towards their experiences established a common ground: “a common language, or a mutual willingness to talk” (Portelli). In the setting of talking about Chinese censorship, the mutual understanding is even more crucial and requires specific contextual knowledge. Censorship, by its nature, prevents sharing and the connections made possible because of it. Thus, asking people to share about their experiences with a very specific type of censorship using the language “account bombing” assumes that tacit knowledge of a once vibrant Weibo public sphere.

My interview approach is also heavily informed by Oakley’s influential feminist approach (Oakley, 1981, p. 49), which proposed a ‘reciprocal relationship’, in which the meaning-making of an interview lies in between the exchanges of two people. As I speak to my interviewees, I would share my thoughts and disclose person experiences as more commonalities emerge. For example, when my interviewee Emily Jin mentioned to me her account was “released from suspension” shortly before it got completely bombed, I told her the story of my personal Weibo account being suspended for 6 months, and how I thought I would never get my account back. My act of self-disclosure prompted her sharing of more theorizing of how the Weibo censorship system works and built a special rapport between us.

However, just as Portelli has also written, “Similarity makes the interview possible; difference makes it meaningful.” I take inspirations from the research method of grounded theory and use my previous interviews to inform my new ones, by probing further into the points of experiences that differ from the collective narrative I had already gathered.

The political sensitivity of my interviews also requires extra attention. Fearful of state retaliation and the watchful eyes among fellow Chinese, most of my interviewees chose to go with a pseudonym, while some chose to have the life details that could be used to identify them redacted. The life history focus of oral history interviews was problematized by Erin Jessee, as she pointed out that including extensive biographical information of narrators might not be the best practice (2011). Based on concerns to protect the safety of my interviewees, I decided to minimize the life history questions in my interviews and transcripts. Instead, I find myself asking supplementary life history questions only when they are implicated by existing answers.

Based on the consideration of common ground, it then makes sense for me to conduct the interviews fully in Chinese despite most of my interviewees are bilingual. For a project that concerns the visceral reactions and emotional implications illicit by user-targeted censorship, a universal but with special Chinese characteristic phenomenon, I believe that speaking in the narrator’s mother tongue can help me get to deeper understanding about the issue. Furthermore, the phenomenon of “account bombing” has already had extensive linguistic and contextual context in the Chinese-speaking community. Using of this language of Weibo communities would preserve the contextual meaning.

After transcribing the interview, I edited out my questions, and edited the narrative of interviewees into a coherent essay. I then translate the essay into English and perform qualitative data analysis on it. I took inspiration from Linda F. Burghardt’s twelve-step

method to mine oral history interviews (2013). After reading through all the edited essays, three recurring themes emerged corresponding to my research questions: the emotional effects after deplatformization; the sense of personhood in digital identities, and the desire to express their views. Apart from these three categories, I also look for the reactions from narrators that would fall into one of the three categories of reaction from previous literature: chilling effect, backfire effect and phoenix effect. I choose the method of qualitative data analysis as it is “a tried and tested methodology, used by generations of researchers looking for ‘a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text’” (Weber, 1990).

As I comb through the text with the three themes and the research questions in mind, I mark the text that corresponds to the themes, and developed a form for initial grouping (see Appendix I).

For my first theme, I look for the affective elements and emotions my narrators experience. The identification of these emotions requires close examination of not just the expressive language, but change of speech patterns, repetition and subtle connotations from specific word choices. The narrator’s statement on whether they feel certain emotions sometimes belies their actual feelings. For example, one of my interviewee Lao Yang said, “I don’t feel particular angry about getting my account bombed”, and then quickly used strong language and curse words to express her frustration to the system. Intricate cases like this demands that I go through the text carefully and be descriptive in coding the text. Throughout my analysis, I make a conscious effort to incorporate the narrators’ reflexivity into my understanding.

As I allow the text to fall into natural groupings, I closely analyze the grouped text from different narrators again to derive conclusions that I find. Although traditional studies in the effect of censorship on individuals have skewed large-n, survey-based methods, I believe

the oral history interviews and interpretive approach I take would add rarely revealed dimensions to the current understanding of censorship in China and social media at large.

Narratives from the interviewees

Po-Chung Chow

“What I lost is not just an account, but an identity and a lifestyle.”

Po-Chung Chow is an assistant professor of Political Philosophy at Hong Kong Chinese University, currently visiting at Shih Hsin University in Taiwan. One of the most visible and outspoken public intellectuals on Weibo, Chow has been a prominent advocator of democracy, freedom, and human rights in China’s public space. Chow started using Weibo in 2011 and was first suspended in June 2018. He tried multiple times to get back to the platform a year after his original account was suspended, until his identity was completely blocked. After being suspended twice after expressing pro-democracy sentiments, Chow published an article for Initium Media, which remain one of the most cited personal accounts on the experiences of account suspension and deplatformization.

I joined Weibo on May 13, 2011, and the first time I was bombed was on June 11, 2018. The reason for the first time I got bombed, I guess, was that I retweeted an article by Mr. Yin Shi¹ about the May Fourth Movement². After that I opened a new account on October 12, 2018, and then on April 27, 2019, I was bombed again. On April 28, 2019, I opened a third account, and after that, I published an article in Initium Media³ about my experience about the two

¹ Chinese writer.

² The May Fourth Movement was a Chinese anti-imperialist, cultural, and political movement which grew out of student protests in Beijing on May 4, 1919. It was deemed sensitive by the authority as it concerns early history of Chinese Communist Party and is often used to criticize the party’s current deviation from its origin.

³ Initium Media is a media covering Chinese diaspora based in Hong Kong.

bombings. This is the third time. Then at the same time I kept a backup account, which was also bombed in a few days, this is the fourth time, that was in July 2019.

I went back to Weibo twice in 2020, when someone helped me register an account, but that survival time was even shorter, and was soon bombed again. So, I was actually bombed 6 times in total. After the 6th time I didn't go back because I felt that the reason I get bombed was no longer other people reported it – I felt that I had been blacklisted in some way the last time I was bombed. The reason I get banned is not because of my comments I made, but simply because my name, Zhou Baosong⁴, that is not allowed to survive in public eyes for long. And by 2020, it was obvious to me that there was a group of people who were systematically watching me, which meant that as soon as I came out on the internet, no matter what I say, I would be bombed. So, I felt that there was no way I could hold on to Weibo any longer, and in the end, there was no place for me to survive.

So, after I got bombed for the last time in 2020, I basically left Weibo completely, and let me see when my last time logging in was – August 11, 2020 – should be my last time surviving. The most followers I had throughout my Weibo career were about 180,000, before the first bombing, and then each time I reincarnate I lose tens of thousands of followers, and after several times of drastic decrease caused by bombing, at last I had about 20,000 followers.

I have speculated the reason why I was targeted, in fact, it is quite simple - Hong Kong. Hong Kong issues became more and more sensitive since 2019. I am a Hong Konger, I have a Hong Kong standpoint. But after 2019, any Hong Konger may be tagged as a “separatist”, and then will get dragged by a large group of nationalists. Frankly speaking, I've always been quite bold in my speeches, and every year on June 4th⁵, I would post some commemorative words.

⁴ The Pinyin romanization of the narrator's name “Chow Po-Chung”.

⁵ June 4th incident, commonly known as the Tiananmen Massacre, was a student-led demonstrations held in Tiananmen Square, Beijing. It is the biggest taboos in China and heavily censored.

In 2014, when the Umbrella Movement⁶ was going on, I had been broadcasting it live, or posting some photos, but none of them has caused me getting bombed. So at times I actually felt Weibo's censorship rules to be quite lenient, and I have wondered if I was met with some kind of preferential treatment because of my Hong Kong identity, or because I was registered overseas, so I was never bombed. Of course, there were often when I was "locked in the small dark room"⁷ throughout.

So, I am very well aware of the reason why I was blocked - the whole Weibo environment had a big reaction to the social movement in Hong Kong, so I guess Weibo management or the Chinese Communist Party officials wanted to eliminate the voices on this topic completely.

In fact, since I registered that second account later, I had been quite careful, I would try to be judicious in expressing my opinions, and I will try to avoid expressing my opinions directly on some sensitive issues. I believe there must be someone designated to keep an eye on influential people, there always have been, from the censorship machine. They must have a list, there must be a special person that's keeping an eye on my speech.

Before my own account got bombed, I've been frankly accustomed to the whole environment of account bombing. I look at different friends every day getting bombed, so when it came to me it was certainly not without psychological preparation. Speaking of account bombing of friends around me I was particularly impressed by Xiao Han, professor at the China University of Political Science and Law, and Guo Yuhua of Tsinghua University. These have been bombed two to three hundred times, yet they constantly re-register another account and come back to keep speaking up.

⁶ The Umbrella Movement was a political movement that emerged during the Hong Kong democracy protests of 2014. It was heavily censored on Chinese social media.

⁷ Chinese online slang, meaning being temporarily banned from the platform.

After the account is gone, you will feel very specifically that you have been murdered. You have a very real life in Weibo, so being blown up means that your whole life in cyberspace, your life, your memory, your connection with all other people... your whole life before was cut off at once, more specifically, like being shot, without any preparation, without any warning. Without any warning, your life in the network suddenly stops.

This emotional effect is quite big, and my bombing experience hits especially hard, because you are completely unguarded. That account I have maintained for 7 - 8 years, during which I sent thousands of tweets, many photos, made a lot of friends you know in the network, to a point that Weibo has become part of your life. You spend a lot of time on it, and it's not just a tool, it's a life. Because your memories, your friends, your identity, your feelings, many things happen in the space, so it's not an external attack, it's a very important part of your life imploded.

Being bombed means that all these things can disappear at once, and so it took one of the most important identities inside you away. When I was deplatformed, it took me a long time to adjust, especially thinking of this account bearing a very special lived experience of mine. After being bombed, you know, you could see what is happening on the platform through your interface, the account actually still exists on your own end, but you can only see others in the discussion, with your yourself not being able to respond. You cannot retweet, you cannot comment – so actually a very strange feeling.

After being bombed, you are becoming a very lonely ghost. I used to watch an American movie called *Ghost* – it kind of felt like that. You are in a state of -- you are around other people, you can see them talking about you, you can see other people grieving your death, but you cannot do anything. And you look at them doing all that, you feel weird, because you can no longer be part of that action, you cannot participate. I have been watching

Weibo as a ghost a long time after my digital death. I didn't want to register for a new account, because I was too sad.

A lot of people say to me: "Why don't to just register for a new account?" But only after a few months since I was bombed, I got a new account, because I was in deep despair for an extended period of time. In 2019, I found out there is a Weibo account called "account bombing bot". Its sole job is to post who got bombed that day. The account's bio says, "the public cemetery of internet". This account gathers information of the people who get bombed real time and announces it. I saw Li Jingye ⁸wrote an article about it then, saying he will check out this bot account every night before sleep, and felt like everyone will eventually have a tombstone in this cemetery.

I already have multiple. There are people who are like Xiao Han, who was bombed for over 300 times. Initially they kill people sporadically, but eventually there is Auschwitz. I was shocked when I read this, and it came to me that — exactly, butchering people everyday is what they are doing on Weibo. They started killing some famous people, and then people who are less famous, and then people you wouldn't even know their names. But such intense lived experience is so little talked about.

I went around and did some research and found out that few people are talking about this topic. So many people are getting killed online very day, but we got so used to it that no one even talk about it. I then decided that I could not let this experience go forgotten. I spent two full months writing that article that published on Initium Media. I think that article is somewhat historically significant, because it is the article that has the strongest systematic analysis of how account bombing works and its implications, from a political philosophical angle.

⁸ Chinese writer and academic.

After my article got published, I knew that if I share the article on Weibo, I would definitely get bombed. I know the consequences. At that time my new Weibo account already has above ten thousand of followers, and I knew if I share this article, it would burnt all that to the ground. But I felt like I needed to do that. I felt like if I had to get bombed, I was going to get bombed over something meaningful, as a form of resistance, also in solidarity with all the people that have been bombed. On July 16th, I posted the article on Weibo. After an hour, my account was gone. Another backup account of mine was also gone.

After I was bombed that time, I can still see people's reaction to my article. In the one hour my article was online it got over a thousand reposts. A lot of people share that they cried reading it. A lot of people went to comment on Initium Media to express their feelings. I realized that so many people felt so deeply about their account bombing experience, but they just cannot say that. The murdering of your digital life has profound impact on you.

So, I chose to tell this story out loud, because I recognize that it is not an isolated incident. It is a universal shared experience that so many of us can relate to.

Y. Qian

“I see Russian public intellectuals criticize their government during the war on Twitter, and I would like to do that one day as well, without worries of facing state retaliation.”

Y.Qian has been on Weibo for more than 7 years. A scholar in Economics, Qian identifies as a dissident, and started to translate key findings from academic papers on COVID-19 since the pandemic started. He was deplatformed on Weibo twice after criticizing China’s zero-covid policy.

I started using Weibo about 10 years ago, but I've never posted anything for a lot of reason. One is probably because I don't feel like a very good writer, and another being I don't have a particularly strong desire to express myself until around 2019 and 2020. I basically just have an account, and then look at the things posted by others on Weibo. When it's around 2018 or 2019, I suddenly started to talk on Weibo because of some personal and environmental reasons.

On the one hand, I was rather miserable in my doctoral studies at that time, and I couldn't write my dissertation. I was working on a project about the impact of censorship on the transmission of information and people's access to politically relevant information or how to do it, from the perspective of game theory. At that time, the results of my research were not so good, on one hand, the results I got prove that the platform or the censorship has a very big influence, there's no way around it, which is depressing. On the other hand, as an academic paper, what I found is not particularly interesting. So, it was like what do I do next, and on the other hand, I felt very pessimistic about the results of the model, so I was so annoyed that I was looking for a place to curse.

In addition to that, it was also obvious that the political environment in China or in China was deteriorating, and with things⁹ happening in Hong Kong, all kinds of factors were combined, so I started to express myself a little bit on the Internet, not in a very serious way, but perhaps more like the feeling of cursing, using it as a tree hole or an outlet for my emotions, and then I slowly started to use my silence for a long time. Then I slowly began to use the position that had never been said for a long time.

At that time, my Weibo account was probably more like a personal account, and there were probably more people with different opinions on Weibo at that time, probably because every time there was a social event, they would see each other because of Weibo's algorithm or its retweeting mechanism, so they slowly gained some traffic and met some people on Weibo. I started to post some things at that time, but not a lot.

When the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, my account transitioned from a pure venting channel to a doctor popularizing science. Because when it first started, Chinese government are blocking out so much information, to a point that I could learn nothing useful about what was happening through the news. But it happened to be a period where a various academic subjects and fields responded very quickly to comment on the ongoing virus.

For example, places like arXiv, medRxiv and bioRxiv¹⁰. They quickly published so many English language academic articles. I would read these articles to make sense of the pandemic, in the hope to catch up, and slowly started to take notes summarizing what I read and post these notes on Weibo.

I quickly realized I wasn't the only one doing this, a lot of others are doing similar things to. I happened to know a guy who was doing a PhD at Durham or somewhere else, he

⁹ He was talking about the National Security Law, other measures Chinese government use to tighten its grip on Hong Kong, and the civil unrest caused by it.

¹⁰ All open-access academic archives.

organized us into a team — a pretty big one, with a group chat of hundreds of people. And that’s how a loosely knit community formed.

It was when quarantine first started. Going outside is highly advised against, so I just spent a lot of time at home translating and compiling credible academic information about Covid and edit it to a readable manner. Because of this, the account our group ran gained a lot of followers — about 10 thousand. My personal account has also gained a significant following. I spent a lot of time and effort on it then.

Covid was a scientific matter, but at the same time a very political thing. As a social science scholar, I sometimes also make comments from the public policy perspective and couldn’t being sarcastic and critical at times. That was when my personal account got bombed for the first time. And then I started a cycle of buying new accounts¹¹ and getting them bombed.

I have bought accounts for 7-8 times, and in total consumed about 20 accounts. Later it turned into bulk buying and bulk reincarnation. In this process I started to realize how the Weibo algorithm can identify you are a previously suspended user. At one point I can open the app with one account logged on and realize when it’s going to be bombed. I could almost reverse engineer how it was done, and was aware that there’s not much I can do. After getting completely bombed I felt a little relieved. It might be better for my mental health. And then I never logged on to Weibo again.

¹¹ Qian was referring to the Weibo accounts selling services on Taobao, an industrial complex that has been existing in legal grey zone. In China, because of the “real-name authentication” requirement, one phone number can only be used to register one account and one ID can only have limited accounts. Therefore, he would need to buy them from someone else.

Unlike a lot of other people, I don't have much emotional attachment to my Weibo account because I don't post a lot of personal stuff. So, when I see it (account being suspended) I was just very irritated – “you wanna fuck with me? I'm gonna come back”

The mechanism of Weibo is if you start using a new account, if you follow a lot of people all at once or post a ton of information, it will limit your rate of exposure. But if it's an account that has a longer track record, has more following or interaction, it will face less shadowbanning¹². So I was preparing a plan B, running a bunch of accounts that I could transition into once my current account dies. I know I'm no filter, and if I keep this way, my accounts will inevitably die quickly.

I was hoping that I could, at least in short term, continue to post what I was posting. As I keep running the group of accounts, I sort of got the pattern of how Weibo identify someone who's been repeatedly kicked off the platform. So, at the same time I realized, as Weibo constantly cleanse its user base, you can feel the people that's left are making this platform worse, and no one could have any fun anymore. So slowly I concluded: ok, turns out I can't win against the censors. And it's a shuttle that I don't really want to be in.

So, at some point I was like, okay I'm done. My phone, my computer, my IP address were all compromised. Once I log on the system would know it's me, and instantly red flag my account. So, I gave up. I have exhausted the accounts anyways.

I think my following views have something to do with my own research and how I approach censorship — I know a lot of people, in this narrow space left on Weibo, still wants to do some sort of expression for public good. I respect these people. I think they did good work. But from my perspective, if you only express your views in a room censorship allows

¹² Shadowban is the practice of blocking or partially blocking a user or the user's content from some areas of an online community in such a way that the ban is not readily apparent to the user, regardless of whether the action is taken by an individual or an algorithm.

you in fact can do very limited to enlighten, or change people's ideas on things. There would even be a lot of adverse effect.

The time that I felt the most desire to express is in the middle of the pandemic, early 2021. We were doing things that help people, and there was a community of scholars. I felt then that I was more prone to voice my opinions on things because it could be productive or useful. When we were doing the Covid info account, there were strangers who messaged us saying they learnt a lot from the information we provided and benefitted directly from it. I was quite happy when I saw those kinds of messages. There were also other people that I knew through Weibo and ended up becoming good friends with.

I don't think of myself as a dissident, in a way that I'm not really expressing my dissent. I just completely reject the narrative about this current regime's legitimacy, or the prospect it has presented for this country's future. This was reflected in my posts on Weibo. I usually just insinuate or express my views in a sarcastic way, and never have seriously written my thoughts into real articles.

Even since Russia invaded Ukraine, I saw so many prominent scholars on Twitter, a lot of them of Russian descent or are Russian nationals, would speak up against the Russian government. There are a lot of shitposts¹³ as well, including ruthless ridicules of Putin. Ideally, I want to be able to do that as well.

As then I think about China. I didn't see any Chinese scholars of similar background criticizing Chinese government like that, at least not enough. A lot of times these things are still done by old white men, and it's not like they did a great job. I constantly think about this

¹³ A deliberately provocative or off-topic comment posted on social media, typically in order to upset others or distract from the main conversation.

— the capacity of Chinese individuals to freely discuss our society and governance without fear of retaliation. And the gap is still so vast, even compared to Russia.

Molly Chi

“I prefer to be able to say whatever I want to say, and not be bound by censorship nor my own pursuit of influence.”

Molly Chi was a vocal opinion leader on Weibo and Zhihu speaking for Hong Kong’s independence and freedom. After condemning chauvinists on Weibo in 2016, she went through years-long cyberbullying. She was deplatformed from Weibo for 4 times and started posting less political and more personal overtime. She is currently a journalist based in Toronto.

I started using Weibo at a very early age. I was in high school, and all my friends around me were using Weibo, so I had already signed up by then - about 2012. I had Weibo in 2012, but at the beginning I was rarely involved in discussions about public events. The people who followed me were basically my high school friends.

Then I went to Hong Kong. In 2014, I went to university in Hong Kong, and then I encountered the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, and I became more active in discussions about public events. In fact, I was not only active on Weibo, but also on Zhihu¹⁴. Zhihu was actually the main platform for me to participate in public discussions because it was more focused on specific issues, for example, there were a lot of questions about "how to evaluate something" and I would probably answer questions about Hong Kong. On Zhihu, the discussion was more focused and it was easier to get some attention. At that time, if I wrote answers to some popular questions, people would discover them, so I used Zhihu more. Of

¹⁴ Zhihu is a Quora-like ask-the-internet kind of forum. The platform targeted China’s highly educated intellectual elites before 2018 and was once an important space for public discourse.

course, there would also be some related discussions on Weibo, and I would repost some Zhihu answers to Weibo. And that's how it was circa 2016.

By the year 2016, I was subjected to a round of cyberbullying because I said something on Weibo that was too extreme to most people. They posted my home address and phone number everywhere. Because I was in Hong Kong at the time, so my mainland phone number was at my family home in Fuzhou. I didn't receive any myself, but later I heard from my parents that they did receive harassing phone calls. During that time my Zhihu account was the first to get bombed, at the beginning of 2016, but the Weibo account was actually okay. My first Weibo account didn't get bombed immediately, until June 4 that year, I went to a candlelight vigil in Hong Kong's Man Yuen¹⁵, and then I posted a picture of the scene on Weibo, and it got bombed almost at the moment I posted it. That was my first account bombing experience.

I think I was just in time for a trend where public views in China were polarizing. Back then there were more room for open discourse, for example, on Zhihu or others social media platforms at that time, there was still some freedom to discuss Hong Kong issues. But now there is no longer any room for opinions different from the official narrative, and if you raise any different point of view, people will attack you with a specific type of rhetoric. But at that time, there was still some room for discussion. But I felt that the whole public opinion environment was deteriorating already in 2016, and I think I was on the forefront of the change.

Speaking of the cyberbullying experience, I think it was a public incident that I spoke on, and I completely forgot the details, but it was probably the kind of unjust happenings that you find very unbelievable, and then the more unbelievable thing is that everyone's attitude

¹⁵ Book store.

towards it was very supportive (of the government), so at that time I felt very angry about the incident itself and everyone's attitude. So, I retweeted on Weibo and said, "If a nuclear bomb fell on this land, not many people would be hurt by mistake. "If I really look at this expression at that time, it means that people who support this matter or people who have no empathy for this matter deserve to die, or something like that. But at that time, it was perceived as an attempt to bring down to China, as many people said, "your parents were among those who would be bombed by your nukes". They put the emphasis on the nuclear bomb, and my point at the time was actually to express my disappointment that a lot of chauvinistic people deserve a bad end because they were so morally corrupt.

When you feel angry, but you can't do anything about those people, you are prone to use hateful words to curse them. I was feeling so strong about it at the time, and maybe just stepped over the line on a certain point, for example, triggered their rage by the notion of "nuclear bomb", so suddenly induced a fierce backlash. And then a lot of people on Weibo and Zhihu started to dox me and spread all kinds of personal information about me. What affected me most about that incident was not the violence of those people, but in the process of this cyberbullying, I found that some of my high school classmates who had been following me since a long time ago were not on my side, instead, one person used his identity as my high school classmate and went out to tell those enraged internet people about how I was in high school, for example, they said that I had a been "mental" since high and other things along those lines, which made me especially sad.

I later found out that the source of the most rumors about my past was a guy I knew, although we were not particularly friendly, but had been familiar with each other, and we used to have some exchange conversations. I think the malice of the people on social media might stem from the fact that they do not know me, they have no real contact with me in real

life, so they have some unexplainable vitriol, or when they do not feel that the other party as a real living person. Cut my high school classmates knew me. I do not understand where their hatred for me came from, so that incident made me particularly sad.

That was the beginning of 2016. After that I didn't use social media for a long time, and then when it came to June 4th, I think I was very aware that if I posted something related to the 1989 pro-democracy movement, my Weibo account might be gone, but I still posted it that day. I probably had a kind of gambling mentality, and I thought it would get bombed. But I decided to take the change because my Zhihu account was already gone. There's nothing much left for me to care about on the Internet anyways.

After the account bombing, I actually felt a little bit of relief and ease, because I felt very relieved that I didn't have to face it anymore, because the account bombing was actually a kind of protection for me, because I don't have to receive all kinds of private messages or comments anymore, and then I can personally be freed from the Internet and go live a real life.

But on the other hand, I think it's unfortunate, that's the account I feel the most pity. I started using that account in 2012, and I had a lot of interactions with my friends in high school on there, like when they wished me a happy birthday and I replied to them, or other things at school that was documented. That was the longest I had ever used a social media account, so I felt very impacted at that time. Later accounts that got bombed were used by me for way shorter periods of time, so did leave me that big of an impression.

I think it's strange because I didn't even have that many followers, I had a little more than 10k followers on Zhihu, and a little short of 10k followers on Weibo. But I don't know why, maybe because the discourse around Hong Kong was more popular at that time, and I was a relatively active participant in the circle of discussing Hong Kong politics, so the

number of interactions I go on my posts was quite large. Then when many people started to scold me, I suddenly realized that more people were aware of my existence than I thought, which I found very strange, and even now people sometimes mention my previous comments. I spoke about the politics of Hong Kong the most in 2015 and 2016, the cyberbullying happened in 2016. But until 2022, after I was bombed about three or four times, if I posted something, and then it happened to be retweeted more, like reaching hundreds of retweets, and then after being exposed to the maggots¹⁶, there will be people in the comment section underneath, saying things like, “I know this person, she has this bad take years ago, and then attach a picture of the screenshot from the very beginning of my Weibo days. I think it's particularly ridiculous - I didn't even keep a record of all the times I said, so why would you still keep it? It was as if the Internet had a special memory on those matters.

So although I actually felt that I didn't have a big influence at the time, I also felt very weird. The internet seemed to hate me far more than I expected, so I didn't get any benefit from using Weibo at all. I couldn't even get any decent promotion collabs with my follower base, you wouldn't get any recognition on the advertisers' side. But maybe I'm remembered because the political circle wasn't particularly large, and maybe I had some memorable traits, like I was a young girl who studied in Hong Kong and then appeared to have been changed by Hong Kong - at least that's what they thought, I looked changed or brainwashed by the Hong Kong ideology.

I actually realized at the time that my own political stance wasn't particularly radical, it was actually very moderate. But you have to be vocal on a public platform to be heard, you have to be impressionable, you have to adopt some relatively extreme expressions (as a public

¹⁶ 蛆(qu), literally translates to maggots, is a derogatory internet slang term referring to ultra-nationalists on Weibo.

opinion leader). So, I feel that my public image on the Internet is completely different from my actual personality. While my image on the Internet will be more intense, a hardliner on a lot of issues, but I am actually not personally like that. Later on, many people I met on the Internet first and later in real life expressed the same sentiment to me, that is, they felt that I was very aggressive on the Internet, but I was a very soft person in real life.

So I also realized that the Internet had changed me, that I had actually altered myself in order to speak up, to be heard, or to be remembered, or to spread my views. I don't like the image of being overly aggressive or speaking up out of self-protection or desire to be provocative. I often getting excited, and then angry, caught in fights with people online. Many times, I realized that the Internet is very dangerous — it is not as friendly as the interpersonal environment around you, it is actually very perilous and can hurt you.

So you can only act like you cannot be harmed if you want people to respect you and think you're not someone to be messed with. Or before they decide to call you out or attack you, they need to know you might attack back vigorously. You must construct a very tough exterior for yourself to do that, but I don't actually like that exterior.

I returned to Weibo with new alt accounts and got bombed repeated for three or four times, but the feeling was a little different from the first time. The first time I got my account bombed, I probably hoped for getting rid of this platform, so I deliberately chose to post sensitive content like June 4th, which I knew 80% of the time would result in deplatformization. I knew clearly that it would end my account on Weibo, but I thought I'd give it a try. I happened to be going to France at that time, it was my junior year of college and I happened to be going on an exchange program in France for the second half of 2016. I thought it was all very meaningless, I was going to go to France, I was going to start a new life, my new life should not be bothered by the existence of Chinese Internet crap.

I wanted to go to a new country, like starting over, to experience a different way of life. That's why at that time I chose this way, consciously or unconsciously, to get rid of my Weibo account, for the first time.

The next few times were not intentional on my part, they all happened sort of random, and one time was particularly strange. And I still don't know what I said exactly to get banned from the platform - it was December of 2019; I remember I didn't say anything that felt sensitive. I went to Hainan on a business trip, and then on the way I was still sharing about the experience, posting "Hainan is very hot" or something like that. After arriving at the hotel, I suddenly found that I cannot log on my account anymore. Then I registered a new Weibo account. The most recent one that got bombed was because when Russia's war against Ukraine broke out on February 24, I sent a tweet on Weibo opposing the war, which was retweeted thousands of times that day.

At that time, everyone in the mainstream was saying, "Russia would destroy the Ukrainians in one go," or "Russia was able to take down Ukraine in one day,". This kind of opinions were flying around, and supporters of Russia were very excited. They thought that Russia was exert its dominance as superpower. At that time, I had no idea how the Ukraine war would go down, but I was very angry about the war. I thought it was unjust, and I hated the attitude of most of Chinese Internet toward the war, so I posted a manifesto-like statement, saying that I was against all wars, no matter what the justifications were. I mentioned that even reasons like reunification would not suffice.

Later on, some of the "pinkos"¹⁷ on Weibo retweeted it, thinking I was insinuating China's desire to retake Taiwan, thinking I was conveying my personal agenda against the

¹⁷ Pinko, Little Pink or Pinkie is an internet slang used to describe young jingoistic Chinese nationalists on the internet.

regime. I did have that in mind at the time though, because I was actually also against China's military takeover of Taiwan. And then after that one was retweeted almost four thousand times, my account was gone. The last time I got deplatformed went like this. The first time I got bombed I really wanted to disengage from the public discourses, so I hoped to do so through a semi-passive way. But the next few times I didn't know what I did cross the line. I just felt the urge to express myself, and I think I do feel a need to share my thoughts with everyone on a public platform.

You know, people like us, who write or are journalists, you always want to put out something that you think is valuable to our time and you think is worth being seen, so you just have a desire to share. When I went abroad for the first time, I was very happy and didn't want to care about politics or anything. But most of the time I think I'm still a person who wants to express or share. I think there are always things that should be said and known, that's why I return to Weibo again and again, but later I don't really care that much about how many followers I have.

I think one of the biggest differences between me now and me in the past is that at that time I would choose a way of expression that was more extreme, or use exaggerating rhetoric to go popular, just because I thought some points should be said and heard. But now, the public opinions environment allows less of that, unlike a few years ago, Chinese Internet was still able to home relatively radical expressions. But now it is completely impossible, and I think the benefits of saying such things are far less than the consequences it may bring, so I choose not to say those things now.

On the other hand is that I'm really tired of myself, in order to say certain things, becoming a slave to those arguments, that is, that point of view itself become more important than you personally.

So you change your natural temperament, you change the way of expression that you feel most comfortable for that point of view, and then you go public and become a vessel to that point of view. Now I don't think any point of view is so important that it's worth distorting my personality to express that point of view, so I'm now more comfortable to be myself online. When sharing more about my personal life, it will attract a lot of people thinking you have a good personality or liking you, but it doesn't have a particularly big spreading effect, very few people will retweet you because you're cute, a very small number of people will praise you or comment below, but you will feel that you are a good friend of theirs on the Internet.

Later on, after I was more comfortable being myself and less polemic, there were some people who followed me that would send me private messages, writing long paragraphs to share with me their lives, or tell me which one of my posts inspired them. I think those were very good interactions. That's all because I no longer emphasize the political aspect of myself, but more on my own personal feelings or emotions.

There is a saying going around the Chinese Internet that if someone has never had their social media account suspended once, he must have a problem with his conscience, especially those with big followings. If they have been using Weibo for maybe 10 years and have accumulated a lot of followers but haven't got their accounts suspended even once by now, it means to some extent that they have chosen to stay silent or to take a relatively safe position whenever a public event happens.

I think that although there is something arbitrary about this statement, it is mostly true. If a person has never been bombed, he may indeed have made some compromises in order to save the account, whether it is to preserve the influence or to the financial gain. Then I realized that the serial bombing of accounts, put me in a state that I never really retain my followers, thus made me appreciate more however many followers I have left. I can talk when

I want to talk, and I can be myself when I want to be myself.

Of course, I still hope my account can keep existing, because each account is an archive of things I have written and said to people, such as comments on someone's posts. And if your account got bombed, you won't be able to see them under other people's post, and others won't be able to see whatever content from you they have commented on or saved. I think this is a pity, so if there is no need (to speak out), I will still try to maintain this account. But I will not particularly censor myself just in order to keep this account intact, if there is a chance to create a greater impact that requires myself to say something.

When things are so out of your hand, you may have to make compromises for some very illusory power, and then your original purpose of doing this thing might get completely lost. For example, you have to say something, but due to censorship there is no way to say it clear and straight, so you can only find another very distorted way to say the same thing, when the words that come out are not the same thing anymore. I prefer to be able to say whatever I want to say, and not be bound by censorship nor my own pursuit of influence.

I don't particularly care about Weibo itself now, but I have some good friends on it, and some very lovely followers. They could feel similar about the community or get some solace from the things I share.

I think the purpose of my writing has completely changed during the journey. At the beginning, because I was studying political science, I was very interested in writing about politics, hoping that I could enlighten the mass, or lead some people to certain directions. Hong Kong is a very small society, and every political figure there has some influence, and I see they can really change the direction a society is going. Because Hong Kong is small, so what every opinion leader say is very important, and then you feel like you can really change something. I did think I could change something by writing about it. But later, probably

because of the change in the political environment and the change in my own mentality, I didn't really want to be involved in anything related to politics, nor did I want to be an opinion leader or a student leader of any sort. I just wanted to be the one to observe the movement and write about it, so that was a very important change in mentality.

Hong Kong have a July 1 parade that I used to participate every year, and then one year I went with my friends , and then actually I did not go into the parade, I just went to a shopping mall next to the parade, and then in the mall you could see the parade through the glass wall. At that moment I suddenly realized What I wanted to do was not to be the person in the parade, not to be the person at the front of the parade, not to be the person on the side of the road with a stand and shouting about my party's political views with a loudspeaker -- I didn't want to be those people, I wanted to be the person standing in a higher place and looking at them through the glass wall.

I realized that if you want to be a political figure or a leader in the academy, you have to sacrifice a lot of complexity in your personality, you have to become a symbol, you have to become a slogan, you have to stand with the slogan forever, you can't be a complex person, because complex people are often wavering, often inconsistent, often changing.

But if you are a political figure, even if you are an opinion leader, you can't be like that, you have to stand up for the people behind you, you have to always be in that position, you can't say something like you feel for men sometimes if you are a feminist leader, you can't say that in fact as a heterosexual woman you enjoy staying with men. If you're a feminist leader and everyone thinks you're a feminist leader, there are things that you can't say that are true to your life, because people will be disappointed in you if you say them, because it affects the movement, it affects what we want to pursue. It affects what we want to pursue, and you as a leader, you should always be at the forefront of pursuing that for us always.

So I think every political leader, they must have sacrificed that part of their humanity or that complex part of their life, but I didn't want to sacrifice that part, I think that's the most important thing for me. So I didn't really support or oppose something very clearly afterwards, and then I did get attacked by some people.

The evolution of my Internet personality in several times of account bombing experiences is a gradual process of regaining myself, that is, the public opinions in my posts are declining, but the posts about personal life are on the rise.

So every time I blew up the number, I would If you want to regain the influence of the past, theoretically you should do something more drastic than your past stance to get back the influence, in fact, this is the easiest way to get influence online, probably because the way to get influence now is very abnormal, so if you want to have influence, you have to follow the rules of the game. But I really don't like the rules of the game, so every time after my bombing, I will be like whatever, I will be able to say what I want to say from now on. In fact, every time I reincarnate into a new account my followers decline, but in fact I became more like myself, you are no longer affected by the eyes of others, you can stop paying attention to those you did not want to pay attention to but due to social pressure is forced to interact with. I think this is really cool, before there are a lot of accounts especially the political circle of people, I used to feel some social pressure, if they follow you, you have to follow back, and then every time after the bombing, a large number of these obligatory mutuals will disappear. I feel very happy.

More or less, I will also try to reduce the sensitivity of their own speech. The platform can tolerate the limit is declining, and the censorship is tightening up, so in fact, you want to speak normally, it is actually very difficult.

In many cases, you did not even say anything, not even many people retweeted, you

just retweeted a very dangerous post, and then the person who posted that, together with all the people on the retweet chain will get bombed. I have many friends' accounts gone because of this — they actually did not say anything themselves, but it's just retweeted something. More or less, I would avoid myself from being bombed in this way.

My biggest concern nowadays is instead to accidentally get into of the limelight on certain issues. Whenever a tweet by me starts to get picked up by people, I will feel happy that my words are recognized and resonate, but on the other hand, I always keep an eye on the retweet chain, and as soon as it gets caught by the maggots, I will delete it or make it only visible to my followers. I was more worried about being doxed, harassed, abused and have to defend myself than the impact and new attention these tweets brought. Even if nothing happens in the end, the process tends to be really exhausting. If these tweets happen to be restricted or deleted by the platform, I feel a little bit of loss and at the same time, I am more relieved. I think there are people floating around like ghosts on the Chinese Internet now, including myself. We are all in pain, sad, and feel powerless, but speak gently to each other, rather than raising our voices, can give us more strength and comfort. What I want is just a small, undisturbed space with a shared understanding.

Lao Yang

“But then the censorship is limiting what you can fight on, so you're at a high level of anger all the time, and then the anger cannot get released like kicking into the iron wall and hurting your toes.”

Lao Yang was one of the most active public opinion leaders that were liberal leaning. She spoke regularly on popular culture, current events and was a critic of the Chinese Communist Party, especially on the treatment of west China's Uyghur communities. She is currently based in New York.

The bombing of my Weibo accounts happened mostly in 2020. I actually got bombed many times. Because I had a main account before, I slowly created many more backup accounts after getting bombed the first time. The first time I got bombed was at the end of 2019, when my partner David suddenly woke me up in the middle of the night and said, "Your Weibo account has been bombed. After the bombing, I was still able to register a new Weibo account through other devices or with some other identity information.

I don't remember the reason for the bombing, but I think it had something to do with the comments I made about Hong Kong and Xinjiang. I got completely deplatformed at the beginning of 2020. Why is this time important? Because I was not able to participate in any of the public discussions about the pandemic. I was allowed to participate in all public discussions before the pandemic, but I was not allowed to participate in any of the public discussions after the pandemic started.

It was amazing at the time because I wrote down a New Year's resolution in 2020, and I was already feeling that participating in public discussions on the Internet was a very high drain on my mental health and my energy, and I hadn't succeeded in turning my account into

an offline action that I felt was meaningful. Because I was in the US, but I started with the expectation that I wanted to do something more substantial.

Then at that time I actually tweeted very fatalistically a few of my New Year Resolution for 2020, one of which was that I wanted to have a good reason to get this account bombed in a meaningful way. I was expecting this cause to be a Xinjiang-related thing, or a Hong Kong-related thing, and I will pine on something and then get it banned. The result was I got bombed the next morning after posting this. There is no reason, that is, I immediately got bombed after writing that I want my account to be bombed in a meaningful way. It made zero sense. It's a very philosophical fallout, that is, when you are trying to outdo the censorship machine, you try very hard to attach a meaning to it, but then it shut you out in the most meaningless way.

I felt like I was being mocked by the system at the time. I felt like I was being ridiculed, and then after that I thought, "Let's see if I can get back". I thought, "Okay, I'm an engineer, right?" I know a little bit about the access control of apps.

Later I realized that when I create a new account, if I logged in this new account with my previous phone, this account would get bombed immediately, like at the moment, I believe it must have some hard coded logic, which may be able to track to device ID, WiFi IP, and can identify a particular person. As long as it meet certain conditions of a blocked person and it will bomb your account immediately.

Another thing that I found out later that would certainly cause me to get bombed is that having the Weibo mutuals follow back my new account, telling everyone "this is Lao Yang's new account, follow her back", I found that as soon as this happened, the same group of people came to follow me, my new account would get bombed.

The amazing thing is that I actually have a Weibo account that is alive now, and it's

one of the Weibo accounts that I have saved with a different computer and different WiFi with an VPN. I think it only survived because no one knew it was me. I'm only doing something completely different from what I did before in this account, and the people who follow me are also completely different from the people before. It's an entertainment account for celebrity news, shipping couples, and following sports. There's nothing that links this account to the old one. somehow this account is the only one that survived.

So there is some simple research done on my part. I was managing this array of accounts that I created with some intention. Although I know I don't want to stay on this platform anymore, I still want to learn a little bit about it.

I haven't been very angry about the bombing thing. I've been telling myself that you should be angry about it, but you're already in such an angry state when you're using the Chinese Internet. So, I can't dial it up. I was like, ok, fuck you. that's where my energy level at the end of my time on Weibo. my response was, "sure, got it. I was like, ok, fuck you. That's where my energy level at the end of my time on Weibo. My response was, "sure, gotcha". I have got more than 10 accounts bombed in total, and in the end became completely numb to it.

Expressing yourself in a public forum, especially on social media, is a game, and it comes with its own set of rules. At the end of the day, a game is an art form that plays with human agency. If it has a certain rule, you will play a certain way. For example, you put a hoop on the wall and encourage people to throw balls in it. Somehow now there's a whole industry of people who do just that who dedicate their titles just getting that ball into a hoop. I think that's the same idea for social media. At some point, before I got deplatformed completely, I already don't know which part of my expression is myself, which part is me conforming to the rules.

It has a dual effect on me. On one hand, because of the censorship, I would experience a strong desire to take back my agency, by trying very hard to vocalize my unfiltered thoughts. But on the other hand, it is after all social media, you have retweets or comments or, there are so many metrics to measure your success, and it's hard for me not to be trained by these metrics. Overtime I will be better at doing certain specific types of expressions on this platform. And I find that I learn quickly whichever platform I'm on -- I will be able get popular with very quickly.

Social media, because it is fragmented, will crush very complex discussions to very flat. It only rewards a specific kind of introspection. If everyone is introspecting this one point, and this one point also make you feel better than everybody else, it is a type of introspection that will be rewarded. But if you want to write or create, or even just to be a better person, you need so much more honesty for yourself. In the end I feel like, although I try very hard to be authentic on social media, I'm not sure how much I'm obeying the rules of the game, and how much I'm really doing what I say I want to say.

And one thing that's remarkable about Weibo is that the more controversial your speech is, the better it would do. As long as there are people getting into fights in your comment section, the engagement number on your post will look really good. It rewards controversy. After I clicked into Weibo each time, the trending posts were usually the most controversial ones, because there would be people arguing in the comment section. The number of likes in the comment section will be counted in the number of likes of your post itself, so this it rewards a very toxic behavior, that is, to not resolve the anger but further provoke anger. It rewards you for getting in this fighting mode, right? But then the censorship is limiting what you can fight on, so you're at a high level of anger all the time, and then the

anger cannot get released like kicking into the iron wall and hurting your toes. You'll be angrier, that is, I'm in a reinforcement loop of anger inside.

So, this is actually very consuming, I do not know what other influential bloggers will feel, but the model this platform is perpetuating is very much out of character for me, because to me communication is an intentional thing, as an introvert, in fact, is that I every time I type a character or say a word or whatever, in fact, I need to spend a lot of time and energy. I also cannot leave the conversation immediately after saying what I have to say. This reinforces loop consumed me very much at that time. So, to a certain extent I am very much looking forward to getting bombed. Release me. I've always told people that I think my addiction to microblogging is a mental health condition.

I'm not like a lot of opinion leaders, like Po-Chung Chow, who I think has this sense of responsibility as a public intellectual. To me, public expression is a more private process. When I am processing things, I'm trying to convince myself, and then I write it down, I send it to other people, and see how the world respond to that. It's like, I'm exposing how I'm learning, exposing the thought process of mine, to seek answers from the crowd. My thinking is not correct.

I believe in a healthy public sphere, what I was doing should be very common. A lot of people should be doing that. Weibo, to an extent, is a space where a lot of people are doing that. Zhihu and Twitter are this kind of spaces too. I enjoy hanging in this kind of spaces. When you come in you process things that are happening in the world and then you find your place in it. I don't think of public expression as an active service, although it is sometimes. If I am doing this, and everybody's doing this, the existence of this space matters. And I'm doing my little part holding up the space.

Steven Lin

“You can be erased at anytime, anywhere, your intellectual property or your thoughts are not safe. it's really not worthy of effort.”

Steven Lin is a PhD student studying Political Science in the U.S. He self-identifies as a moderate, pro-establishment commentor of Chinese current affairs and politics. He was active on Weibo introducing academic findings in political science to a popular audience and has a big following in the academia for sharing information and resources. Lin currently lives in Texas with his wife.

I have a Weibo account that I used for a long time, my so-called main account I used for over 10 years, since high school, and it had about 120k followers, so you can count me as a public opinion leader, but not the most important ones, not a "big V"¹⁸.

I got bombed after the protest that happened in Beijing at the time, the protest that happened before the 20th National Congress. I didn't know about this at the time, I didn't know about it happened, and saw someone posted something like a tribute to the brave man¹⁹ on Weibo. I went to the comment section to ask what happened, and then they didn't reply. In fact, I found out later that he used messaged me what happened over WhatsApp, but I didn't see it at the time, so I tweeted again asking what happened and why everyone was praising it. I was totally just curious and had no idea what was going on.

¹⁸ 大 V, literally translates to “big V”, is Chinese internet slang for the top influential Weibo users.

¹⁹ The brave man here refers to Peng Lifa, aka “the bridge man”, who strung two banners from the Sitong bridge on Beijing's Third Ring, calling for the boycott and removal of Xi Jinping.

Then someone hinted at this in the comments section, and then someone sent me the name of the place Sitong bridge directly in a private message to me. I went to Twitter and searched the keyword and learnt what happened. I suspect that the keyword was detected in the private message and led to the bombing of my account, or maybe it was a sensitive comment I didn't notice in the comments section, it could be automatically hidden by the system if the name of the place was mentioned, so I suspect that the bombing of my account is directly related to this matter.

But the more bizarre part of the bombing of my main account is that I'm now sort of an internet mummy -- all my content on the main account is still there, and you can now even browse all of the things I've written, and then I still have the ability to like posts, but nothing beyond that. I can still like, I can't follow, I can't comment, I can't retweet, I can't post anything or make any edits, I can't change my avatar or profile, I can only tap like.

But the posts on my account can still be seen, and others can even retweet and comment on my existing content. So, I'm mummified like a dead body, and then everyone can view my remains.

My condition should technically be called permanently suspended, and I'm wondering why that I'm not completely bombed. I have two theories, the first is that Weibo has a way to determine the extent of a bombing, so they left me half alive by leaving my previous content alone to so that it can still contribute to their traffic, for commercial reasons, that's one. The second possibility is that they know that I am not the main culprit, that is, they know that this aspect I did not participate in the dissemination or participation in the proliferation of this protest, their system monitored this sensitive keyword from comment section or from the private message, that is, my followers caused me to be associated with this matter, so the system may think I did not have subjective malice, this might be the reason.

I don't know if there is a way to get my account back. I went to the customer service to complain, they also did not give me a direct response, but anyways, it is said to be permanently banned.

I have always had a backup account. The reason why I had it is because I need a place to share my personal life with my previous girlfriend now my wife. We need this channel for PDA²⁰ (laugh). And then later I started interaction with mutuals on my main account, and they all learnt about it. I started a backup account because I have some trolls on the main one, and sometimes when I want to pause using the main account for a while, but do not want to break contact with friends, so I use the side account. So I have been using this side account for a while. When the main account was bombed, I thought I should let everyone know I have this backup account that I have migrated to. But when I tried to send this message that day, with a screenshot of the notification I got of the permanent ban, but Weibo certainly have a system to monitor the content of the post, so didn't have a lot of success spreading the word, and when I finally got the post out it was immediately shadowbanned.

Then I finally adopted a variety of tactics, made a bunch of marks on the picture to avoid being detected, and finally send it out. Many mutuals helped me by reposting that, and the post got reposted more than 100 times, with a lot of views. And then that night I saw a rapid rise of followers on my side account, I forget to how many, but along the lines of 4,000 to 5,000. But then that post got shadowbanned again, its comment section got turned off, and it also cannot be retweeted. So, I guess Weibo found out about what I was trying to do, but they did not do anything immediately (to suspend my backup account), my side account can still be used, until the closing of the twentieth national congress.

²⁰ Public Display of Affection. Lin is using the term jokingly here.

Then, I was watching the closing of the 20th National Congress and saw that when the Central Committee members were listed, Li and Wang²¹ were out. I then posted 4 characters, saying "no surprise". This tweet should have drawn some unnecessary attention, and then my backup account got bombed. That "no surprise" post might have been retweeted for only four or five times. I went to appeal afterwards, and the reason given by the platform was that someone had reported me, citing that I violated the relevant laws and regulations or something. I guess it must be that post, because I haven't said anything particularly sensitive before or after that. It's also possible that some of the comments I made before were on the radar, because I've always been very much against the excessive Covid control measures²², so I have mentioned and discussed the Chinese Covid policy. But I think the more directly relevant one is the tweet concerning the 20th National Congress.

After that I thought I'd say forget it, because and my two cell phone numbers are used, so I also now have no way to register new account, resulting in me now posting on WeChat moment very diligently now, now that there's no more Weibo. I think I have a very strong desire to express myself. You see something you want to share, you want to do something, and then you want to post about it. Before I will post everything on Weibo very diligently. Now I just post in WeChat moments. I talk less now, but it might be good. It might spare me from a lot of attacks.

I have a strong feeling that my main account would be bombed sooner or later. But I also have another premonition - if you have followed me on that account, you know that I was actually pretty "pink". I think if you have to put people into two camps based on their

²¹ Li Keqiang, former Premier and Wang Yang, former Guangdong party boss and widely seen as a potential candidate for new premier. The two are seen as the contrarian voices against Xi in the center of power. Their fading out of the picture as Xi got his third term was regarded as Xi reaching a total control.

²² This is referring to China's Zero-Covid Policy, a public health policy "of control and maximum suppression".

political stance, the traitors²³ and the pinkos, I fall into the pinkos. I was even berated by many international students for being too pink, and many of my more liberal peers even blocked me because of it.

There are other peers who also block me and unfollow me, because they think I am too pink. If you have to pin me down to a camp, I have to fall into the pinkos. I was even mutuals with the very pink group of people, such as Creamy Banana²⁴. But if you look at what people say about me online, you'll know that I should be considered a very moderate pinko. But I have a strong feeling that I will be bombed sooner or later. Because my understanding from a political science researcher's point of view, the focus of censorship is not on your political position. Your position does not matter. The focus is control, the focus is the higher governance, or this regime need to have a way to influence and control what you say.

That was my premonition. Another feeling is that, if I, being so cautious, could get bombed, then no one could have any fun anymore. I am already so cautious and intentional in what I say. I am hardly extreme and would never say crazy extreme things like Creamy Banana. I also am nothing like a lot of liberals, who constantly hate on things. I was very cautious in what I say. I also have a lot of peers in the academia that follow me, so I care about my image. I mainly post about the academia and research, and rarely comment on politics directly. The furthest I would go is to make a harmless political joke. At most I repost some news or drop a quick quip.

I do have periods that I experience stronger desire to speak up, For example, the Feng County incident. That was a time I got attacked a lot online, because I have been telling

²³ 反贼 (fan zei), literally translates to traitors, is Chinese internet slang referring to those with anti-regime sentiments or often criticize the government.

²⁴ Creamy Banana (@creamyjiao 蕉) is a hyper-chauvinist, pro-regime account on Weibo. He famously appropriates the decolonization theory to justify China's authoritarian control and Han supremacy.

everyone that they shouldn't be misled by misinformation just because they are compassionate. And then the liberals torn me apart, they said I was morally corrupt for not condemning the government but condemning them empathetic citizens. But there was fake news circulating, right?

Since the Feng County²⁵ thing, my desire to comment on current affairs has been dropping. I would still repost a lot about the Covid policy, because that's important to me.

My habit at the time has always been that if I want to repost something, it has to have some practical significance. If it is purely for my desire to express, I will set it to only visible to fans, like I just want to post complaints or something. But once I am publicly reposting the content, I believe it is meaningful, it will contribute to public opinions that might push the government to make some changes, or to help highlighting some information that needs to be seen by more.

If I am already so cautious and moderate, and I could get bombed, Weibo is really already very meaningless. There wouldn't be any point keep using it anyways. With these premonitions in mind, I wasn't surprised at all when I learnt that I got bombed. I just felt very funny. My first reaction is, "so you get me killed, how happy would the traitors be seeing that, right?"

If they see these even pro-regime pinkos can get bombed, or people who appears they are pandering to the government got suspended, how funny would it be? How can a government like this manage the public ideology well? I felt that it was truly terrible. My first reaction was not very shocked or angry. Under the current circumstances, getting bombed is a

²⁵ Referring to the Xuzhou chained woman incident, also known as the Xuzhou eight-child mother incident, is a case of human trafficking, severe mistreatment, and subsequent events that came to light in late January. The video of a mentally disturbed and unlawfully imprisoned woman who was chained to a wall and who gave birth to eight children went viral on China's internet and sparked a huge public outcry. Content around this incident and requests to thoroughly investigate the matter has been heavily censored on Chinese internet.

thing that would happen sooner or later. I just don't know how long I will live. But getting bombed is inevitable.

The mood and thoughts are different when my backup account was bombed compared to when the main account was bombed. I think this difference may not only be caused by the bombing of accounts but has something to do with the 20th National Congress during this period — the new leadership outcome was worse than my expectation. I found that the second time my account was bombed, it was when I wanted to retweet something, I was notified that the action couldn't go through, I needed to verify it. But when I try to verify it, the system told me your account is gone because someone reported you. So, it's now in a state where if you click in that my homepage, it will say user no longer exists, it's all gone, completely bombed away.

I was probably in deeper despair when the side account was bombed. With such small following, I should not be on the list of key surveillance targets, I should not be monitored to the extent that as soon as I start any new account, it will immediately get bombed. Anyway, at that time my first reaction is "never mind it might be better to get off this platform", I think to a large extent it also reduced my desire to speak on the public platform. I think it's not worth it anymore. I had been so careful before that, and barely said anything on my backup account, and then still got this kind of treatment. I think it is not an environment worth the effort anymore.

I think the first time I got bombed on my main account, I did not feel my desire to express my views change that much. I did not feel that I self-censor more, I still should say whatever I want to say. I think the second time after the bombing, is the time I feel like it's really not worth it anymore. I think an important reason is that you do not know when you will be bombed again — this is a kind of a property security problem, that is, after you speak

or you seriously wrote something, you can be erased at anytime, anywhere, your intellectual property or your thoughts are not safe. it's really not worthy of effort. From the political science perspective, we will say this is a problem of copyright, without property rights guaranteed, I have no way to do long-term investment, I have no way to get stability. If the future gains are not expected, I would not be prone to do any stable investment.

When I speak or write something on Weibo, it is relatively serious. I put a lot of effort into it, it's not casual or emotional shitposting. The reason why I have a lot of followers is I do a lot of work, because I introduce the public to a lot of academic literature. And that requires a lot of effort and reflects some of my views and opinions. I cannot go introduce something that I don't find credible, right? And if you want me to spend the same effort to do this kind of work now, I think I may not be interested.

The second is the emotional aspect, I think it is definitely there, inevitably. I post extra frequent on WeChat now, and the reason is that I still want to share with others, or want to exchange views with others, or even take stances on public issues.

I think my case is complicated, or the troublesome thing in my case is what we call multi treatment in political science. Two things happened simultaneously, the 20th National Congress and the account bombing. So, the change in beliefs and attitudes, might be caused by a compound of both, because they parallel in time. But my ideology or politics should have changed, or my view of Chinese politics as a whole has changed.

The account bombing has effects on two aspects, one is to make me feel that the bureaucratic incompetence (of Chinese government). The whole thing has been kind of brutal, if you really want to maintain good ideological leadership, or public opinion propaganda, censoring me is simply self-destructive. Although I did not try to be deliberately pro-regime or deliberately to do propaganda, I should still a positive voice in favor of the

official narrative (the government tries to push), but you try to kill me in your structure and system — how can you do your job well when you cannot even get this simple thing right?

The second thing is impact on my personal ideology. I don't know, it's quite subtle and complicated, I can't quite tell, but I think there is a kind of stress response, that is, I will be angry. I will still be angry, I will be angry that you won't let me talk, I will be angry, so my view on some things will change, this is emotional.

I'm analyzing myself now, and this anger is also partly performative, after I've been bombed, I may tend to want to express myself the way a censored person would, there's a performative thing in it. If I'm bombed, I'm still so pro-regime, that would seem extra ridiculous, so there would be some changes in my public attitude. I think we have a basic expectation of the reaction after the bombing, that is, your resistance or your dissatisfaction. If not expressed, it will seem a little cowardly. So, I think in the week that my backup account was still alive, I was a little under the influence of this feeling, in that period of time I would be more anti-regime, if you want to say so.

I think the thing I regret a lot is that I have made some friends on Weibo, especially some mutuals in the academia, that I haven't got other chances to ask for their personal contact. We might have interacted often. Some I just know them by their handles, but I don't know who they really are. All my previous posts are still there, so if I really want to comb through it and look, it technically is possible. But now that I'm bombed, I cannot direct message them or ask for their contact. I think this what I feel very sorry for. I was pretty sad that I lost all these social connections. It was fine when it comes to the content, because I have always been keeping a backup copy on notion, knowing that I might be bombed someday.

There were a lot of people on the internet who likes to discuss with me. I have three or five hardcore fans who like to comment on anything I post, and they are older than me, and I

can feel that they are middle-aged men. I think they make a lot of sense when they talk about things, they are more experienced than me, and I have a lot to learn from debating with them. But now I've completely lost touch with them and there's just no that kind of opportunity anymore.

Emily X. Jin

“It felt like death and life at the same time become very heavy and very light.”

Emily Jin is a novelist, translator and scholar focusing on science fiction. She was active on Weibo using the moniker @CaoMuQingHan, speaking on literature, popular culture and a series of social issues. She is currently living in Connecticut.

My microblogging ID was called @CaoMuQingHan (CMQH), it's an account I used from 2010 until the fall of 2021, a main account that lasted for 11 years. I've been using this account since I was in high school or junior high school, and I've been using it since Sina Weibo first started. Before I was bombed, I have been suspended before, but the bombing happened in November 2021. I remember that November 7 was the day of my digital death.

I was temporarily suspended before I got bombed, mainly because of the incident with Xiao Zhan, that is, the “227 incident”²⁶ called by the internet. On February 27, 2020, one of the largest international fanfiction websites is Archive of Our Own²⁷ was officially blocked in China, mainly because someone posted a homoerotic story about Xiao Zhan. Angry Xiao Zhan fans reported that the website saying its obscene and pornographic to the government, as a result it got completely banned in China. After this happened, there was a lot of grievances on Weibo. Many people who were interested in fan fiction and anime were showing their solidarity, not wanting to be unable to access a fan fiction website just because of Xiao Zhan and his fan base. People are very worried that this would set a precedence, so

²⁶ The Boycott against Xiao Zhan Incident, also known as the 227 Incident, is a 2020 online controversy that originated between the fans of Chinese actor Xiao Zhan and Archive of Our Own users in Mainland China.

²⁷ Archive of Our Own is a nonprofit open-source repository for fanfiction and other fanworks contributed by users.

that in the future, anyone could use the tyranny of public apparatus for private purposes. Through these snitches on internet, they could end a website where so many communities have fun on taking advantage of this country's censorship.

Then at that time I made some remarks that against the reporting behavior of Xiao Zhan fans, and then was reported by Xiao Zhan fans in turn. So, there was a temporary suspension on my account. My post also got shadowbanned, but at that time I would still receive a clear message saying the reason for suspension is many reports. My account was not bombed, and the main reason, I suspect, is because I didn't say anything overtly political or aggressive, and it came down to personal beef with his fandom.

But on November 7, 2021, when I got fully bombed, the nature of this time is completely different. I got bombed because of the Peng Shuai²⁸ thing. The context of this matter is that I am a tennis fan, so in fact I was using this Weibo account a lot to follow sports. When I found out about Peng Shuai, I was very shocked, and felt very disgusted. But at that time, I did not directly retweet Peng's post. I still tried to hold it back, try not to lose my account. Until a little while later, I suddenly found that even the hashtag #tennis was blocked. I thought this was too absurd — a whole sport, even the word tennis cannot be discussed to cover up a state leader's scandal. At that time a lot of people partake in the discussion started to withdraw from the discussion, realizing the matter was too risky to gossip about.

I was so angry, and I sent a tweet saying this is very very shameless. I did not drop any names. I was just very angry and posted “We have seen it and we also remember” and then added two tennis emoji. Then I went to bed.

²⁸ In 2022, Peng Shuai, one of China's top tennis players, came out on Weibo and accused former Vice-Premier Zhang Gaoli of coercing her into having sex. It became the most heavily censored topics on Chinese internet.

Then the next morning when I woke up to a lot of notifications on Weibo. On WeChat, a lot of friends messaged me telling me my Weibo account was gone, mostly friends in China. And then one of them witnessed the moment my account got bombed — he saw my post on this home page and tapped in the post. A second later he refreshed the page, the page went blank, and it appeared “the user violated Weibo regulations and is blocked”, he even recorded the moment. So, I woke up feeling very shocked, I went to sleep and woke up to a bombed account, and every function has been frozen on my end.

I felt very shocked at first, because I have used Weibo for more than ten years. I certainly have made remarks complaining about the society before, but this time I didn't even mention any keyword. I only said I saw it, it wasn't even that many words, but even so Weibo could not let go of me.

Then I began to disbelieve. I felt a chill sent down my whole body and cannot believe how my account could be gone so quickly. I have more than ten years of time, so many good friends all tied up on it, and a lot of sentimental value attached to the account, so at that time it really felt like a death. Then I went through the process and filled out an appeal, which was the only way that could possibly lead to the recovery of the account. I went to see the account recovery guide and asked around friends who had the experience, and then it said that appeal is the only way. You might be able to ask the system why you got bombed, and then hope that they can give you a statement, and if they find your circumstances are not serious, you might be able to write a letter of guarantee reflecting on your mistake, and have the account returned to you.

There was a window of making an appeal, it seems to be 24 hours or something, I'd fill out every time the window refreshed. But after a few days, I was already prepared to accept my digital death.

Although my main account got bombed, but I also immediately registered a new account, using a new number, because after all, there are still a lot of connections in publishing left on there, that I need to recover. But I was also quite discouraged go on Weibo because I couldn't do anything with my old account anymore, a bit like an internet ghost. I can see my home page, I can see others, but I cannot speak, others see me also only see a gray profile. Later I also read a joke about the different tiers of being bombed, my type is called death with an intact body. A more thorough death that doesn't even leave a body behind is that you cannot even see the home page, you are simply shut out from Weibo. Then there is the highest level, when you cannot even register a new account.

The moment I got bombed, I had 3,763 fans, not a lot, but the interaction is still there, every day every time I post something there is interactions, there are 695 follows, and then a total of 9,174 posts.

My first reaction was shock. I was sitting in bed, because I thought it was a very ordinary morning, after whining on Weibo and went back to sleep, but I got up and grabbed my phone and found that I got bombed. I really did not think the few sentences I said can lead to that, the most I would expect was to get shadowbanned, because I think I did not name names. I have been in many discussions bordering on the sensitive topic this year, but this was the first time I feel that Weibo has turned into a crazy killer robot.

I spent a long time tracking a lot of people who were more or less affected by the same thing and found that a lot of people bombed this time said nothing, they just retweeted the original text of Peng, and that would result in losing their entire account.

A lot of people still tried to get involved in the discussion, someone began to use a variety of newly registered accounts in the trial, that is, to see what kind of euphemism and metaphor they can use to bypass censorship, so that they could continue to discuss the matter

without being caught. Because I remember before Weibo only ban by keywords, it is done by Ai, you just do not mention some key names of people and places and your post would most likely be okay. But that day the results were different. The most outrageous one I heard is someone made up a story about American athlete Serena Williams being harassed by Joe Biden to insinuate it, and then her account was also gone.

I felt sad for my own account, and at the same time very confused. I wonder how they were able to screen us out. We already were very careful not to retweet and not to mention keywords, and later found that even this kind of storytelling, even this kind of metaphor, cannot get away with punishment. I think it must be done all manual; I think AI cannot accomplish this.

I was very sad on the first day. There is nowhere else I could interact with so many friends so conveniently. I also have a lot of writers I admire that took a long time to become my mutuals. And now I had none. It was quite annoying.

I take this account as a cyber clone of me. In fact, I am not the kind of person who is good at curating an internet personality. The things I post are generally life mixed with some messy ideas, and then occasionally I go crazy, with also hobbies and other stuff all mixed in.

So, on Weibo I can express myself in a very authentic way. It's interesting that before my bombing, I posted something that almost felt like a curse on myself. I sent out a tweet saying I think I like my internet personality better because I think I use it to express some aspects of my personality that may be difficult to express in real life, and it ended up becoming a better version of myself through my ID @CMQH. Like I think I might not have such strong sense of justice in real life, or I wouldn't be as outspoken, this internet personality of mine is sharper and braver than myself. It would speak up for unfair things people experience and is more comfortable expressing views and emotions. But in real life, my

friends may see me as more of a more introverted and agreeable person. So, I think CMQH is a very idealistic version of me. It also removed a lot of gender constraints I have on me, because my Weibo profile says my gender is male. I feel that when I interact with people using Weibo, I actually don't think about the gender of the others or my own gender that much, and am less sensitive to gender roles, whereas in real life I could be less straightforward speaking my opinions. But perhaps as CMQH, I will be more likely to think of myself as an existence that is ideal in my mind.

In a lot of ways, CMQH was my armor online. I felt very safe when I was hiding inside and operating it. But now I'm like a mecha warrior without the mecha, which suddenly instilled a lot of distrust in me for the internet. I felt that I am actually a very vulnerable existence.

So, there was definitely this feeling that I died very quickly and suddenly, but on the same day I registered a new account, I came back and started to add back some friends, and then I would feel that this situation seems to be very easy to resurrect as well. It felt like death and life at the same time become very heavy and very light. The sense of absurdity and rupture came from the loss of a so-called virtual identity, a completely flat one that was carried through text. But it is really part of my soul. Me and my friends felt real grief for it.

After this experience, I may be more firmly turned to a more pessimistic about the role of science and technology on the society. Because on Sina Weibo, my account has died already. With memory of its death or my own digital death, I have no way to entrust my emotions, my data, information, my interpersonal relationships, social relationships a system that can block me with one-click or erase my presence without even a trace left.

A few days after the bombing I was still very sad. I felt like part of myself has been torn out. I haven't got completely used to using the new account — it's just not the same. I feel like

my very old soul has reincarnated into a new, frail body. My followers were all gone, friends are also all gone — it felt like I was talking to myself. Although I was back in the same space, it felt very lonely. I think the death of CMQH really made me think about death, now that I've died once in the spiritual sense. But what is even more absurd is that as soon as I put down my phone, it seems like my real life is going on fine, very mundane and uneventful. My physical body is alive and well, but my spiritual clone has died quietly.

Growing up reading a lot of science fiction, I was constantly warned about how dangerous technology is, that technology might be able to destroy you. In a cyberpunk way, people's virtual clone may triumph over than their physical existence. CMQH can then be viewed as a cyborg that can go places my physical body cannot extend to in the cyber world. So, when he died, I instantly feel for the dystopian novels I have read and would feel that huge absurdity.

After sad and scared, I started to feel angry — that was the last stage, I think. The fear lasted for a long time, and in the end, I probably stopped being sad, stopped grieving, and then stopped being so angry, but that fear still remained. Fast forward to this year, for example, during the epidemic when I saw that human life was made light of, I would associate it with my experience. My life on Weibo was also a life that was made light of.

I not just find technology more threatening, but censorship more arbitrary. I think the time that this change of standard happened was clear: the pandemic. Before, you can vaguely speculate where the line was. A lot of grievances can still go out relying on users' tacit knowledge of the rules. But now when anymore posts anything remotely sensitive, there will be others commenting "you will lose your account" jokingly – account bombing has become something so mundane, something people get so used to. But it shouldn't be a norm. The years when CMQH was the most active, this wasn't the norm.

This reality did make me more pessimistic and depressed. I used to be more willing to express my opinions for impact, kind of imaging myself as a cyber Xiake²⁹. – someone who always stand up for the voiceless, who make a difference with my words – feels a little full of myself looking back. I thought I knew how to duck the censorship well and dance around the line. I thought as long as I package the issue I try to say with metaphors and poetic proses, I would be fine.

But now at my new account, although I occasionally post about news, but I felt more prone to not talk about public affairs. It's not necessarily fear, but a feeling of tiredness. I became more cowardly and I don't want to die again. Account bombing these days are already so arbitrary. I spent so much effort getting thousands of followers back, so I better just keep them. I began to post more about my life and social life. Even when I express some opinions, it's mostly on movies and books. Every time I want to comment on some serious current affair, I would feel a loss of words.

I think no matter how brave you are, even if your physical body is outside of the Great fire wall, the feeling of losing a digital life is one hard to get over. Losing a platform that you used to have a voice on feels like losing a limb. You can get a prosthetic limb, a new account, but it would never feel the same.

²⁹ Character prototype in traditional Chinese literature, a chivalrous person, knight-errant

Findings & Analysis

Through the research question that guided the study, “What are the emotional/behavioral effects of account suspension/deplatformization on public opinion leaders?”, “How do the public opinion leaders’ desire to speak on social media change due to account suspension/ deplatformization?” and “How has deplatformization impacted their perception of digital identity in relation to their offline identity?”, I examined the six interviews above that I conducted over the four months. Nine categories emerged from the data collected: (1) emotions felt; (2) other reactions to censorship; (3) metaphor of life and death; (4) fluctuation of desire to speak; (5) three effects categories (chilling, backfire, phoenix); (6) identity; (7) notion of mental health; (8) other underlying desires in social media use; and (9) critique of social media (see Appendix 2).

First, the coding of emotional response led me to understand the affective dimension of Weibo’s public sphere.

Bearing witness to public happenings entails a panoply of affective attachments: curiosity, care, political passions, extended empathy, investment of time, frictions of communication, openness to challenges and desires of connection between different bodies. Such preoccupation of individuals does not take place in isolation — but occurs simultaneously through circulations of information mediated by the platform. The platform, thus, gains power not just by being the intermediary between one user and another, but the technological environment that all this affective connection lives in. As the central platform for China’s public discourse, Weibo thus carries a certain “affective intensity,” as affect gets produced and circulated on the platform through every small act of engagement. As Jodi Dean has written:

“Affect, or *jouissance* in Lacanian terms, is what accrues from reflexive communication, from communication for its own sake, from the endless circular movement of commenting, adding notes and links, bringing in new friends and followers, layering and interconnecting myriad communications platforms and devices. Every little tweet or comment, every forwarded image or petition, accrues a tiny affective nugget, a little surplus enjoyment, a smidgen of attention that attaches to it, making it stand out from the larger flow before it blends back in. (2010)”

The dense circulation of emotions is intensified as users spend more time on the platform – as all of my interviewees mentioned the time that they spent on the platform made the account special. The accounts, after years of use constitutes “archives of feelings” (Cvetkovich, 2003), as the ephemeral moments of self-expression can link the larger lived experiences of being a liberal public intellectual in China.

My narrators, as keen witnesses and citizens, have all during a certain time engaged in intensive affective labor: to follow the news cycle, help surface new information and voices, voice their own opinions, and interact with other keen eyes who are bearing witness. The stories from my narrators have demonstrated a cycle of affective engagement – from the breaking of news, emergence of key sources of information, and surges in conversation, to the artificial cool-down by means of account bombing, post deletion and shadow banning. Their active engagement in public events is thus subject to a double-ephemerality: for the short-memory nature of social media and the tyranny of state censorship.

Despite my interviewees showed a varying degree of willingness to articulate their emotions, one affective aspect that all of them mentioned is the attachment to human-to-human connections as mediated by Weibo. To them, “posting content has become a necessary

means by which to maintain intimacy with peers” (Davis & James, 2013), and getting deplatformed represents a rupture in such continuous connection. As Jin has noted:

So, there was definitely this feeling that I died very quickly and suddenly, but on the same day I registered a new account, I came back and started to add back some friends, and then I would feel that this situation seems to be very easy to resurrect as well. It felt like death and life at the same time become very heavy and very light. The sense of absurdity and rupture came from the loss of a so-called virtual identity, a completely flat one that was carried through text. But it is really part of my soul. Me and my friends felt real grief for it.

Under a culture of political apathy and public secrecy, any offline form of political participation is unimaginable, and outright dangerous. Digital platforms, thus, not only don't serve as a substitute for offline reality, but they take precedence, when it comes to an Arendtian sense of “vita activa”; a life that takes place in the public realm on the level of history, without direct real-life consequences. Metaphors of life and death permeate the accounts from my narrators and are reflected in the popular lingo: being “bombed” means getting an account permanently shut down without any warning; “reincarnate” means coming back after a previous account suspension in a different but similar new identity; “ghost” and “phantom” were constantly mentioned when narrators refer to their experience post-deplatformization. The phrases have highlighted the visceral effect a deplatformization experience brings – it is not just the killing of a digital life, but a political life and a civic life – that is as tangible as flesh. As Po-Chung Chow, a narrator of mine said: “Weibo has become a slaughterhouse, the Oświęcim of our day and age”.

An array of negative emotions was mentioned during the interviews describing the moments of encountering direct user-based censorship: feeling shock, excluded, being watched, unsafe, sadness, pain, confused, lonely, deprived, irritated, agitated... These emotional responses can be divided into X categories, loosely corresponding to the three effects put forward by previous research (See Table.1). It is worth noting that although the evidence of given effects involves emotions shown, the existence of the emotion does not necessitate the certain effect. For example, Jin mentioned she experienced anger in her interview, while she did not show a prominent pattern of Backfire effect. These effects, as shown by all my interviewees, came in compound. While emotions related to rage drives the Backfire Effect, emotions related to sadness and grief drove the Chilling Effect. Phoenix Effect, on the other hand, involves a complex set of emotions including curiosity. Out of my interviewees, all of them showed a level of curiosity and willingness to experiment when faced with the censorship machine. All of them registered new accounts and at least attempted to get back to the platform, as two of them went as far as running scaled experiments on the platform in order to learn its inner working.

Effects	Corresponding emotions
Chilling Effect	Being watched, threats, shock, pain, mourning, depressed, tired, fearful
Backfire Effect	Irritated, anger, rebelliousness, rage, annoyance, feeling mocked
Phoenix Effect	Confusion, curiosity, feeling challenged
Numbing Effect	Emptiness, loneliness, deprivation, feeling defeated, tired, drained

Table. 1

Concluding all these emotions, I hereby propose another effect shown consistent in the testimonies of my interviewees but hasn't been discussed in existing literature: Numbing effect. Although the three existing effects captures most of the emotional and behavioral

changes these public opinion leaders face, they are lacking in describing the ubiquitous drain battling censorship cause or a gradually decreased level of engagement. In Zhu and Fu's study (2020), "minimal effect" was included alongside backfire effect and chilling effect to examine the hypothesis that censorship does not have many implications on users' opinion expression. However, I did not include it because it doesn't really describe any reaction – a lack of reaction is also different from what I am trying to propose here, which is a gradually wane of intensity of affects on individuals, as they found out, in their own words, "I could not win against censorship" (Qian). As they keep spending a large amount of time on the platform, existence of censorship and its tighten grip drastically decrease the enjoyment and fulfillment they could get from engaging with the platform, leading to forced pivot of voice or numbing of feelings. As my interviewee Lao Yang has said:

I haven't been very angry about the bombing thing. I've been telling myself that you should be angry about it, but you're already in such an angry state when you're using the Chinese Internet. So I can't dail it up. My response was, "sure, got it. I was like, ok, fuck you. That's where my energy level at the end of my time on Weibo. My response was, "sure, gotcha". I have got more than 10 accounts bombed in total, and in the end became completely numb to it.

A pessimistic approach to their usage of Weibo, partially linked to phoenix effect, which equipped them with the knowledge of a very likely demise of their digital life. Two of my interviewees explicated predicted their digital death, while 5 of them foresaw it. In a public sphere that is governed stronghandedly by an authoritarian government, being deplatformed, to the outspoken opinion leaders, almost felt fatalistic (Yang, Lin).

The existence on Weibo, for those who actively witness, is a precarious one, a “being-towards-death,” where a premature death could dawn upon them anytime, without warning. Users learn to play the “boundary ball,” a phrase that refers to the act of speaking that will “skirt the line and test the limits of the permissible, all the while staying within bounds” (Liu). My narrators, aware of the potential risk and eventual demise, all exhibit a prudent optimism and strategic mindset: if the imminent fall off the cliff edge is unavoidable, at least they could choose the ways an account is used during its “lifetime,” and attempt to engineer a desirable death, be it a slow slide or a sudden tumble.

A strong sense of personhood was attached to their digital lives, often presented using metaphors of life and death. My interviewee Chow called Weibo a “slaughterhouse” that has dreadful atrocities as numerable accounts keep getting shut down. To my interviewees, the account embodies their digital identity, which is deeply intertwined with their own identity but can also take on its own life. This is reflected in the Weibo slangs they use: being temporarily suspended is called “locked in a small room”; register a new account is called “reincarnate”, and the very wording of “account bombing” signifies a violent and sudden act where bodies are destroyed into ashes. Just as Woodward (2002) has put it, “As Woodward (2002) has neatly put it, “Cyberspace may be disembodied but it is still ‘real’ bodies who press the keys and write the scripts”. The body-less identity online enabled some of my interviewees to “adopt identities that were not physically their own” (Cover, 2016) including gender play, which engendered “an ideal version of self” (Jin).

However, there are also less expected and categorizable emotional effects from my interviewees – the sense of ease and relief. During the interview, half of my interviewees mentioned to me that they felt a sense of relief when their account is bombed, as the vicious cycle of social media and censorship made them feel trapped, exhausted and nihilistic. They

all also mentioned mental health, as they clearly felt like the battle with social media has clearly been mentally taxing for them. Clearly, this feeling is not solely caused by being deplatformed itself, but a compounding effect being active in Weibo's public sphere. This calls back to Margaret Roberts' characterization of Chinese censorship – it acts as a tax rather than ban on information. This metaphor could be easily expanded to the individuals that are using social media to engage in public discussions: deplatformization is not just technical difficulties to resolve, but an emotional tax so steep that drastically disaffect and demotivate them to participate in public discussions.

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Appendix

Appendix I : Interview Guide

Life history questions

- What was early life like for you?
- Tell me a story that shows what your family members are like – do they have any opinion about you being vocal online?
- Paint a picture for me of your childhood home.
- Paint a picture of a place that was important to you when you were young.
- What was school like for you?

Thematic questions

- Tell me about your experience getting your account deplatformed/banned. What do you feel after that?
- Tell me about your experience interacting with censorship before account suspension/ban
- What brought you to social media platforms?
- When did you start actively posting?
- How do you think your desire to share your thoughts out in the public has changed throughout the course of your social media presence?
- Tell me about your experience “reincarnate” as a new account. How many fans persist? What do you think is lost and what do you think is retained?
- Tell me about a friend/connection that you knew through social media. The first time you met... a story that shows how they impacted you ... a story that shows how you impacted them.
- Who do you think your audience are? Do you create content/post your opinions with a clear audience in mind?

- What is one post/tweet that you still remember clearly? What informed/inspired that post/tweet and how did it do within your audience?

Appendix 2: Coding Notes

1. Reaction to censorship

Narrator	Quote	Feeling / Reaction	Effect	Other themes
Chow	I felt that I had been blacklisted in some way the last time I was bombed. The reason I get banned is not because of my comments I made, but simply because my name, Zhou Baosong, that is not allowed to survive in public eyes for long.	Feeling not accepted, alienated, identity being threatened	N/A	
Chow	And by 2020, it was obvious to me that there was a group of people who were systematically watching me.	Feeling being watched	N/A	
Chow	After the account is gone, you will feel very specifically that you have been murdered. You have a very real life in Weibo, so being blown up means that your whole life in cyberspace, your life, your memory, your connection with all other people... your whole life before was cut off at once, more specifically, like being shot, without any preparation, without any warning. Without any warning, your life in the network suddenly stops.	Feeling threatened, grief, bemoaning	Chilling effect	Metaphor of life and death
Chow	This emotional effect is quite big, and my bombing experience hits especially hard, because you are completely unguarded. That account I have maintained for 7 - 8 years, during which I sent thousands of tweets, many photos, made a lot of friends you know in the network, to a point that Weibo has become part of your life. You spend a lot of time on it, and it's not just a tool, it's a life. Because your memories, your friends, your identity, your feelings, many things happen in the space, so it's not an external attack, it's a very important part of your life imploded.	Feeling shock, sadness, pain, mourning, wistful	Chilling effect	Metaphor of life and death Having a hard time accepting it
Chow	Being bombed means that all these things can disappear at once, and so it took one of the most important identity inside you away.	Feeling emptiness,	N/A	Loss of identity

Chow	After being bombed, you know, you could see what is happening on the platform through your interface, the account actually still exists on your own end, but you can only see others in the discussion, with your yourself not being able to respond. You cannot retweet, you cannot comment, so actually a very strange feeling.	Feeling restrained, confused	N/A	
Chow	After being bombed, you are becoming a very lonely ghost. I used to watch an American movie called Ghost – it kind of felt like that. You are in a state of — you are around other people, you can see them talking about you, you can see other people grieving your death, but you cannot do anything. And you look at them doing all that, you feel weird, because you can no longer be part of that action, you cannot participate. I have been watching Weibo as a ghost a long time after my digital death. I didn't want to register for a new account, because I was too sad.	Feeling Loneliness, sadness, isolation, sense of deprivation	Chilling Effect	Metaphor of life and death
Qian	At that point I realized that's not much I could do anymore, it's time to say goodbye to the platform. I felt a sense of relief, and think it might be better for my mental health that way, and then never came back to Weibo again.	Feeling sense of relief	Chilling effect	Notion of mental health
Qian	Unlike a lot of other people, I don't have much emotional attachment to my Weibo account because I don't post a lot of personal stuff. So when I see it (account being suspended) I was just very irritated – “you wanna fuck with me? I'm gonna come back”	Feeling irritated, rebellious, agitated Reaction: learn to circumvent rules to come back	Backfire effect	
Qian	And then I started a cycle of buying new accounts and getting them bombed. I have bought accounts for 7-8 times, and in total consumed about 20 accounts. Later it turned into bulk	Reaction: scale up the resistance	Phoenix Effect	

	buying and bulk reincarnation. In this process I started to realize how the Weibo algorithm can identify you are a previously suspended user. At one point I can open the app with one account logged on and realize when it's gonna be bombed. I could almost reverse engineer how it was done, and also was aware that there's not much I can do.			
Qian	After getting completely bombed I actually felt a little relieved. It might be better for my mental health. And then I never logged on to Weibo again.	Feeling relieved		Notion of mental health
Qian	So at the same time I realized, as Weibo constantly cleanse its user base, you can feel the people that's left are making this platform worse, and no one could have any fun anymore. So slowly I came to a conclusion: ok, turns out I can't win against the censors. And also it's a shuttle that I don't really want to be in.	Feeling defeated	Chilling effect	
Yang	I haven't been very angry about the bombing thing. I've been telling myself that you should be angry about it, but you're already in such an angry state when you're using the Chinese Internet. So I can't dail it up. My response was, "sure, got it. I was like, ok, fuck you. That's where my energy level at the end of my time on Weibo. My response was, "sure, gotcha". I have got more than 10 accounts bombed in total, and in the end became completely numb to it.	Feeling angry, numb, emptiness, tired, drained	Chilling effect	
Yang	I was already feeling that participating in public discussions on the Internet was a very high drain on my mental health and my energy, and I hadn't succeeded in turning my account into an offline action that I felt was meaningful.	Feeling drained, meaningless, demotivated Reflection on social media use		Notion of mental health
Yang	Then at that time I actually tweeted very fatalistically a few of my New	Feeling fatalistic	Phoenix effect	Pessimism, Optimism

	Year Resolution for 2020, one of which was that I wanted to have a good reason to get this account bombed in a meaningful way.			
Yang	I felt like I was being mocked by the system at the time. I felt like I was being ridiculed, and then after that I thought, "Let's see if I can get back". I thought, "Okay, I'm an engineer, right?" I know a little bit about the access control of apps.	Feeling mocked, ridiculed, rebellious, agitated	Backfire effect, Phoenix effect	
Yang	So actually there is some simple research done on my part. I was managing this array of accounts that I created with some intention. Although I know I don't want to stay on this platform anymore, I still want to learn a little bit about it.	Feeling curious, challenged, rebellious	Backfire effect, Phoenix effect, Chilling effect	
Yang	It has a dual effect on me. On one hand, because of the censorship, I would experience a strong desire to take back my agency, by trying very hard to vocalize my unfiltered thoughts. But on the other hand, it is after all social media, you have retweets or comments or, there are so many metrics to measure your success, and it's hard for me not to be trained by these metrics.	Feeling rebellious, trapped	Backfire effect	
Yang	The number of likes in the comment section will be counted in the number of likes of your post itself, so this it rewards a very toxic behavior, that is, to not resolve the anger but further provoke anger. It rewards you for getting in this fighting mode, right? But then the censorship is limiting what you can fight on, so you're at a high level of anger all the time, and then the anger cannot get released like kicking into the iron wall and hurting your toes. You'll be angrier, that is, I'm in a reinforcement loop of anger inside.	Feeling angry, trapped, helpless	Backfire effect, Chilling effect	Negative feedback loop
Yang	This reinforcement loop actually consumed me very much at that time. So to a certain extent I am very	Feeling consumed, drained, relieved	N/A	Notion of mental health,

	much looking forward to getting bombed. Release me. I've always told people that I think my addiction to microblogging is a mental health condition.			looking forward to being bombed
Jin	I felt very shocked at first, because I have used Weibo for more than ten years. I certainly have made remarks complaining about the society before, but this time I didn't even mention any keyword. I only said I saw it, it wasn't even that many words, but even so Weibo could not let go of me.	Feeling shocked, disbelief	N/A	
Jin	Then I began to disbelieve. I felt a chill sent down my whole body and cannot believe how my account could be gone so quickly. I have more than ten years of time, so many good friends all tied up on it, and a lot of sentimental value attached to the account, so at that time it really felt like a death.	Feeling disbelief	N/A	
Jin	Then I went through the process and filled out an appeal, which was the only way that could possibly lead to the recovery of the account.	Reaction: try to appeal to get account back	N/A	
Jin	Although my main account got bombed, but I also immediately registered a new account, using a new number, because after all, there are still a lot of connections in publishing left on there, that I need to recover. But I was also quite discouraged go on Weibo because I couldn't do anything with my old account anymore, a bit like an internet ghost.	Reaction: register for a new account	Chilling effect	
Jin	I felt sad for my own account, and at the same time very confused. I wonder how they were able to screen us out. We already were very careful not to retweet and not to mention keywords, and later found that even this kind of storytelling, even this kind of metaphor, cannot get away with punishment.	Feeling confused, curious	N/A	

Jin	I was very sad on the first day. There is nowhere else I could interact with so many friends so conveniently. I also have a lot of writers I admire that took a long time to become my mutuals. And now I had none. It was quite annoying.	Feeling sad, annoyed	N/A	
Jin	In a lot of ways, CMQH was my armor online. I felt very safe when I was hiding inside and operating it. But now I'm like a mecha warrior without the mecha, which suddenly instilled a lot of distrust in me for the internet. I felt that I am actually a very vulnerable existence.	Feeling insecure, vulnerable	N/A	Sense of personhood
Jin	So there was definitely this feeling that I died very quickly and suddenly, but on the same day I registered a new account, I came back and started to add back some friends, and then I would feel that this situation seems to be very easy to resurrect as well. It felt like death and life at the same time become very heavy and very light. The sense of absurdity and rupture came from the loss of a so-called virtual identity, a completely flat one that was carried through text. But it is really part of my soul. Me and my friends felt real grief for it.	Feeling absurd, grief	N/A	Sense of rupture, personhood
Jin	After this experience, I may be more firmly turned to a more pessimistic about the role of science and technology on the society.	Feeling pessimistic	N/A	Pessimism towards technology
Jin	A few days after the bombing I was still very sad. I felt like part of myself has been torn out. I haven't got completely used to using the new account — it's just not the same. I feel like my very old soul has reincarnated into a new, frail body. My followers were all gone, friends are also all gone — it felt like I was talking to myself. Although I was back in the same space, it felt very lonely.	Feeling sad, incomplete, lonely, empty	N/A	

Jin	After sad and scared, I started to feel angry — that was the last stage, I think. The fear lasted for a long time, and in the end, I probably stopped being sad, stopped grieving, and then stopped being so angry, but that fear still remained.	Feeling scared, angry, fearful	N/A	
Jin	I not just find technology more threatening, but censorship more arbitrary. I think the time that this change of standard happened was clear: the pandemic.	Feeling threatened by technology	N/A	
Jin	This reality did make me more pessimistic and depressed. I used to be more willing to express my opinions for impact, kind of imaging myself as a cyber Xiake. – someone who always stand up for the voiceless, who make a difference with my words – feels a little full of myself looking back. I thought I knew how to duck the censorship well and dance around the line. I thought as long as I package the issue I try to say with metaphors and poetic proses, I would be fine.	Feeling depressed, pessimistic, discouraged	Chilling effect, Phoenix effect (before)	Change in desire to speak
Jin	But now at my new account, although I occasionally post about news, but I felt more prone to not talk about public affairs. It's not necessarily fear, but a feeling of tiredness. I became more cowardly and because I don't want to die again.	Feeling tired, drained	Chilling effect	
Lin	I have two theories, the first is that Weibo has a way to determine the extent of a bombing, so they left me half alive by leaving my previous content alone to so that it can still contribute to their traffic, for commercial reasons, that's one. The second possibility is that they know that I am not the main culprit, that is, they know that this aspect I did not participate in the dissemination or participation in the proliferation of this protest, their system monitored	Reaction: analyzing, trying to decode censorship	N/A	

	this sensitive keyword from comment section or from the private message, that is, my followers caused me to be associated with this matter, so the system may think I did not have subjective malice, this might be the reason.			
Lin	Then I finally adopted a variety of tactics, made a bunch of marks on the picture to avoid being detected, and finally send it out.		Phoenix effect	
Lin	I have a strong feeling that my main account would be bombed sooner or later.	Feeling fatalistic	N/A	
Lin	If I am already so cautious and moderate, and I could get bombed, Weibo is really already very meaningless. There wouldn't be any point keep using it anyways. With these premonitions in mind, I wasn't surprised at all when I learnt that I got bombed. I just felt very funny. My first reaction is, "so you get me killed, how happy would the traitors be seeing that, right?"	Feeling disappointed, discouraged	Chilling effect	
Lin	My first reaction was not very shocked or angry. Under the current circumstances, getting bombed is a thing that would happen sooner or later. I just don't know how long I will live. But getting bombed is inevitable.	Feeling numb, fatalistic, pessimistic	N/A	
Lin	I was probably in deeper despair when the side account was bombed. With such small following, I should not be on the list of key surveillance targets, I should not be monitored to the extent that as soon as I start any new account, it will immediately get bombed.	Feeling sad, despair, disbelief	N/A	
Lin	I think it is not an environment worth the effort anymore.	Feeling let down, meaningless		Decision to leave Weibo
Lin	I don't know, it's actually quite subtle and complicated, I can't quite tell, but I think there is a kind of stress response, that is, I will be angry. I	Feeling angry		

	will still be angry, I will be angry that you won't let me talk, I will be angry, so my view on some things will change, this is emotional.			
Lin	But now I've completely lost touch with them and there's just no that kind of opportunity anymore.	Feeling regret, nostalgic	N/A	
Chi	After the account bombing, I actually felt a little bit of relief and ease, because I felt very relieved that I didn't have to face it anymore, because the account bombing was actually a kind of protection for me, because I don't have to receive all kinds of private messages or comments anymore, and then I can personally be freed from the Internet and go live a real life.	Feeling relieved	N/A	
Chi	So although I actually felt that I didn't have a big influence at the time, I also felt very weird. The internet seemed to hate me far more than I expected, so I didn't get any benefit from using Weibo at all.	Feeling unsafe, discouraged	Chilling effect	
Chi	But on the other hand, I think it's unfortunate, that's the account I feel the most pity. I started using that account in 2012, and I had a lot of interactions with my friends in high school on there, like when they wished me a happy birthday and I replied to them, or other things at school that was documented.	Feeling regret, nostalgic, wistful	N/A	
Chi	The first time I got bombed I really wanted to disengage from the public discourses, so I hoped to do so through a semi-passive way.	Feeling fatalistic, self-destructive	N/A	
Chi	When things are so out of your hand, you may have to make compromises for some very illusory power, and then your original purpose of doing this thing might get completely lost. For example, you have to say something, but due to censorship there is no way to say it clear and straight, so you can only find another very distorted way to say the same	Feeling trapped	Phoenix effect	

	thing, when the words that come out are not the same thing anymore.			
Chi	More or less, I will also try to reduce the sensitivity of their own speech. The platform can tolerate the limit is declining, and the censorship is tightening up, so in fact, you want to speak normally, it is actually very difficult.	Feeling policed Reaction: self-censorship	Chilling effect	
Chi	If these tweets happen to be restricted or deleted by the platform, I feel a little bit of loss and at the same time, I am actually more relieved. I think there are people floating around like ghosts on the Chinese Internet now, including myself. We are all in pain, sad, and feel powerless, but speak gently to each other, rather than raising our voices, can give us more strength and comfort. What I want is just a small, undisturbed space with a shared understanding.	Feeling sad, relieved, powerless	N/A	Desire to connect