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THE CHANGING STYLE
OF CONTENTION

Like literary works, popular contentious forms have styles. Some social movements are somber and serious, others are lighthearted, humorous, and pleasurable.¹ Some are grandiose and assertive, others plain and moderate. Some movements have an epic style, boasting of large numbers and a prolonged duration. Others are essayistic, involving only small-scale and episodic activities. Just as literary styles convey aesthetic ideals, so movement styles express participants' political aspirations and self-understanding. They channel and circumscribe movement dynamics. Radical revolutionaries express messianic visions and adopt hyperbolic styles of political struggle; reformist activists follow more moderate styles. Sometimes the existing action repertoire facilitates the rise of a social movement. At other times, the lack of a new action repertoire constrains mobilization. A movement cycle (such as the student movements of the 1960s) generates its own recognizable style.

The archetypal form of popular protest in modern China has an epic style. Protesters expressed soaring aspirations and death-defying resoluteness to attain noble ideals.² This style persists both online and offline. Yet alongside it, more prosaic and playful styles have gained salience. I argue that both the prosaic and playful elements are prominent in the styles of online activism. In this sense, online activism marks the appearance of a new style of contention. The significance of the new style lies less in its observable political outcomes than in its forging of a new sensibility toward power and authority. Whereas an "emperor-worship mentality" characterized China's long tradition of popular contention all the way up to the student movement in 1989,³ this mentality begins to dissolve in the contentious culture of the Internet

age. This new style, however, is not limited to online activism. It is rather a feature of China's new citizen activism in general. The causes of the rise of this new style are rooted in changing social and political conditions as well as in changes in media technologies.

1989: The Style of a Grand Narrative

The repression of the student movement in 1989 marked the end of an era. From a broader historical perspective, this was China's new enlightenment epoch. The aspirations for new enlightenment were born out of the disillusionment with the Cultural Revolution. They found a powerful public expression in what has come to be known as the Democracy Wall movement. In the winter of 1978 and 1979, a wave of protests happened in major cities across China. A segment of an old wall, seven or eight feet high and about a hundred yards long, sitting humbly at the intersection of Xidan Road and Changan Avenue in the center of Beijing, was the center of the protests (hence the Democracy Wall movement). The wall served as an informal center for public information and gatherings. People hung posters on it or went there to read or copy posters. Many "people's publications," the most important aspect of the movement, were first posted on the wall or distributed there.⁴ There were meetings, public speeches, debates, and protests.

Two themes emerged from the wall posters and unofficial publications of this movement. One was a denunciation of Cultural Revolution policies and demands for redressing past wrongs and the improvement of current living conditions. Sent-down youth, for example, rallied in Shanghai to denounce the sent-down policy and demand their return to the city.⁵ The other main theme was a call for democratic political reform, articulated most directly in Wei Jingsheng's essay on the "Fifth Modernization." The critique of past policies was bitter, with a sense of misplaced confidence in the party leadership, and the calls for democratic reforms were uttered with a sense of mission to modernize the nation and an optimistic attitude toward the future. The journal *Qimeng* [Enlightenment], as the first "people's publication" to come out of this period, marked the symbolic beginning of an entire era. With no less symbolic significance for understanding the mood of the 1980s, its inaugural statement on October 11, 1978, announced, "We want to sing a song for the future. We want to light the torch of enlightenment with our own lives."⁶ The inaugural statement of *Democracy and Times* claimed: "We have launched this journal in the hope that it will air the voice of the people, raise the ideo-

logical level of the people, promote social modernization, and speed up the process of the four modernizations.”⁷

These aspirations were repeatedly articulated and then dashed throughout the 1980s both in the literary and cultural movements of the period and in popular protests such as the student demonstrations in 1986. From this effervescence of cultural and social activism, there emerged an incipient civil society of informal intellectual networks and a “culture fever” of book publishing and public debate.⁸ Undoubtedly the most influential product of the culture fever was the TV documentary series *River Elegy*. First aired in June 1988, *River Elegy* depicted the tortuous process of Chinese modernity in startling images and metaphors. In contrasting a Chinese culture represented by the poverty of the yellow earth to an open and vibrant Western culture symbolized by blue seas, the film series rekindled the fiery critique of Chinese traditional culture by intellectuals of the May Fourth generation in the early twentieth century.⁹ These were the aspirations motivating the prodemocracy movement in 1989. They were demands for a democratic and economically developed modern China.

River Elegy owed much of its power to the medium of representation. A TV documentary series was a new media genre at that time. Television, of course, was no longer new, nor was the television series. Martial-arts TV drama series imported from Hong Kong had already become popular. CCTV had aired to great success its documentary series *Huashuo changjiang* [Story of the Yangzi River].¹⁰ But *River Elegy* was a semi-independently produced TV documentary series with sponsorship from the CCTV. It was a product of the new kind of cultural activism that had appeared in the 1980s.¹¹ This was new. Thus both in contents and in the use of media, *River Elegy* was reminiscent of the New Culture movement, in which the enlightenment ideals also had been articulated through new media, including the new periodicals, a new literature, the adoption of the new vernacular language of *baihua* (as opposed to classical Chinese), and translations of foreign literature.¹² As I will show throughout this book, the expression of contemporary aspirations in online activism is again closely tied to the development of new media.

The gigantic scale of the movement in 1989, the lives it claimed, the soaring ideals it expressed, and the unprecedented international reverberations it created combined to turn it into the grandest narrative of China’s enlightenment project in recent history.¹³ The grandeur of the movement was evident in its style, both in the scale of the street demonstrations and in the symbols (recall the huge statue of the Goddess of Democracy installed on Tiananmen Square during the movement) and narratives it generated.

The movement produced many manifesto-style public statements, such as hunger-strike declarations, public notices, open letters, and urgent appeals.¹⁴ Manifestos express resounding revolutionary aspirations,¹⁵ for example, the “New May Fourth Manifesto,” which was read in Tiananmen Square by Wuer Kaixi on behalf of the Beijing Students’ Federation on the seventieth anniversary of the May Fourth movement. It opens by rhetorically establishing students today as the spiritual heirs of China’s modern democratic tradition:

Seventy years ago, a large group of illustrious students assembled in front of Tiananmen, and a new chapter in the history of China was opened. Today, we are once again assembled here, not only to commemorate that monumental day but more importantly, to carry forward the May Fourth spirit of science and democracy. Today, in front of the symbol of the Chinese nation, Tiananmen, we can proudly proclaim to all the people in our nation that we are worthy of the pioneers of seventy years ago.¹⁶

It then expresses a determination to carry on the unaccomplished tasks of fighting for science and democracy and called on the student movement to liberate the people:

Fellow students, fellow countrymen, the future and fate of the Chinese nation are intimately linked to each of our hearts. This student movement has but one goal, that is, to facilitate the process of modernization by raising high the banners of democracy and science, by liberating people from the constraints of feudal ideology, and by promoting freedom, human rights, and rule of law.¹⁷

It ends by reiterating the nobleness of their mission and expressing a fearless spirit in a great common struggle:

Our ancient, thousand-year civilization is waiting, our great people, one billion strong, are watching. What qualms can we possibly have? What is there to fear? Fellow students, fellow countrymen, here at richly symbolic Tiananmen, let us once again search together and struggle together for democracy, for science, for freedom, for human rights, and for rule by law. Let our cries awaken our young Republic!¹⁸

The New May Fourth Manifesto thus proclaims the moral legitimacy of the student protesters, the nobleness of their mission, and the heroic spirit

to fight for the mission. These are expressed—made manifest—in sublime figures of speech, metaphors, adjectives, superlatives, and rhetorical questions. They convey youthful passion much more forcefully than the clarity and specificity of ideas or action plans.

With the end of the 1989 student movement, history entered a new age. “The age of innocence is gone,” as the literary scholar Jing Wang puts it in a chapter that captures the spirit of what she calls “the postapocalyptic new age.”¹⁹ Wang continues: “The 1990s in China seems an age of Attitude. Mockeries reverberate. Verbal spews are street theater. It has become a national knack to satirize a society gone mad with consumerism while quietly going along with the greed.”²⁰

Geremie Barmé similarly notes that with the repression of the 1989 movement, “the story of the new enlightenment and cultural development since the late 1970s marked by discoveries, innovations, efforts to catch up with East Asia and the West, and new perceptions . . . had run its course.”²¹ In his colorful language, Barmé paints the post-1989 cultural scene in “gray,” which he describes as “a syndrome that combined hopelessness, uncertainty, and ennui with irony, sarcasm, and a large dose of fatalism.”²²

Xudong Zhang describes the post-1989 intellectual scene as “depressing, bleak, and disoriented,” noting that as the 1990s unfolded, the following entrenched assumptions of the previous decade dispersed:

- (1) intellectuals and the bureaucratic state were natural, inseparable partners in herding the people through wholesale social change while maintaining order;
- (2) intellectuals were the moral conscience of the people and had the ability and right to speak for the people’s desires and longings;
- (3) achieving modernity . . . was the goal of the Chinese people, and intellectuals constituted the high priesthood for this cause.²³

The Playful Style of Digital Contention

For both Jing Wang and Geremie Barmé, mockery and satire betray the styles of an emerging consumer culture in the 1990s. Very soon, mockeries and satire would merge into a broader current of a playful Internet culture. The parodic-travesty forms of digital contention I discussed in the previous chapter embody this playful style.

As Bakhtin demonstrates in his study of carnival forms, play is part of the heteroglossia of the novel. For Bakhtin, the novel is an inclusive genre characterized by diversity and multiplicity of style, speech genres, and voices.

The heterogeneous elements in a novel are interrelated. They form the locus where, as Michael Holquist puts it, “centripetal and centrifugal forces collide.”²⁴ This is the condition of heteroglossia. Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia is couched in a philosophy of language that departs fundamentally from the Cartesian paradigm of the monologic thinker.²⁵ He writes:

Philosophy of language, linguistics and stylistics [i.e., such as they have come down to us] have all postulated a simple and unmediated relation of speaker to his unitary and singular “own” language, and have postulated as well simple realization of this language in the monologic utterance of the individual. Such disciplines actually know only two poles in the life of language . . . on the one hand, the system of a *unitary language*, and on the other the *individual* speaking in this language.²⁶

For Bakhtin, unitary language is a homogenizing, centripetal force “opposed to the realities of heteroglossia.”²⁷ If unitary language perches “in the higher official socio-ideological levels,” the centrifugal forces of heteroglossia reside on the lower levels. Heteroglossia is thus the language of the common people, consciously opposed to official language and ideology.

The playful culture in Chinese cyberspace is a central part of the heteroglossia in contemporary Chinese culture. It arises out of the interactions of multiple life experiences and cultures both at the local and global levels. This cultural plurality releases the creative energy directed at the mocking of power and authority. There are countless creative and parodic cultural products circulating in Chinese cyberspace. Hu Ge’s parody of *The Promise* discussed in the previous chapter is a good example. Let me mention one more example: During the avian flu crisis in 2004 and 2005, some people blamed the flu on chickens rather than on humans. Mass killing of chickens occurred as a preventive measure. Several Flash movies in circulation online expressed dissent by taking the “chicken” perspective. One Flash movie combines music with animation and lyrics. Part of the lyrics reads as follows:

I don’t wanna say I’m very clean
 I don’t wanna say I’m very safe
 But I cannot bear being misunderstood
 . . .
 I do not object to your eating my meat
 It’s fine if you take my eggs
 But I cannot bear being seen as pollution
 . . .

Bird flu, big danger
 It's our misfortune to have a bird ancestor
 My kids' dad's been executed
 My kids' brother's seized for experiment
 Nowadays a chicken has a harder life than a human
 If I survive today and tomorrow
 I'll meet my end day after tomorrow.²⁸

This is humorous verse. It is funny and playful, yet it delivers a sobering message of dissent in a social atmosphere of fear.

Like other types of artwork, Flash movies enrich the vocabulary for public expression. One case in my sample is about the struggles for rights and recognition by hepatitis-B carriers. On April 3, 2004, someone named “lonelyrosie” posted a message in the main BBS forum for hepatitis-B carriers. The author expressed frustration at the withdrawal of a proposal to the National People’s Congress about promoting the human rights of hepatitis-B carriers: “This reminds me of a flash about the avian flu that I saw before. I have just seen it another time and it made me think a lot. Either call on us to voluntarily enter the incinerators [like the chickens in the Flash movie], so that China could drop its label as a nation full of hepatitis-B carriers . . . or protect our rights as ‘humans’ . . . and stop the widespread discrimination.”²⁹ This individual compares the situation of hepatitis-B carriers to that of chickens during the avian flu crisis. The avian flu Flash movie provided a new metaphor for expressing dissent about the discrimination against hepatitis-B carriers.

The Prosaic Style of Digital Contention

Besides being playful, the style of online activism has a prosaic side characterized by a matter-of-fact approach and a self-conscious avoidance of heroic grandeur. On the eve of the eighth anniversary of June Fourth, democracy activists in China launched what they claimed to be the first “free magazine” edited in mainland China and distributed by e-mail, *Sui dao* [Tunnel].³⁰ In an inaugural statement that departs significantly from the manifesto-style statements during the Democracy Wall and June Fourth movements, its editors encouraged readers to forward the magazine to others and explained carefully how to avoid personal risk in the process of transmitting the information:

If you do not want the recipients to know who else are receiving the *Tunnel* you are forwarding, you may use functions like “Bcc.” For example, in

Eudora, you may insert multiple addresses in the “Bcc” line and the recipients will only see their own names and not other people’s names. Also, never forget to turn off your signature file (signature.pce), because that file contains your personal information.³¹

Indicative of their self-conscious turn away from revolutionary rhetoric and practice, the editors further explained:

For sure, here there are no passionate words and soaring speeches typical of inaugural statements. This is because our basis for founding *Tunnel* lies in technology. Free and shining ideas have always existed. It is a matter of whether they can be disseminated. The reason why autocrats could seal our ears and eyes and fix our thoughts is that they monopolize the technology of disseminating information. Computer networks have changed this equation. . . . The question is whether we know how to use this technology. Instead of indulging in the talk of noble causes and great aspirations, it is a better idea to quietly and patiently study the details of the technology. If we have turned our inaugural statement into a technical manual, it is because we are trying to practice this idea. It may be easier for us to approach our shared dream of freedom and democracy through the sideways of technical details than the public square of seething emotions.³²

In the following decade, this unassuming style of factual description and analysis in the form of a technical manual gradually replaced the revolutionary style of epic imagery, apocalyptic tones, and prescriptive ideals. Two recent examples further illustrate this new style. On April 26, 2006, in view of the soaring real-estate prices in China, Zou Tao, a blogger in Shenzhen, issued an open letter calling on people to join a movement to boycott real-estate purchases. He delivered the simple message that because real-estate prices were artificially high, for the next three years, people should stop buying property as a means of resistance. The lengthy letter expressed no soaring ideals, instead providing a detailed analysis of why he thought people were being turned into slaves of their property (*fang nu*):

The commercial real estate prices in Shenzhen are surging at an astonishing speed. . . . Is this because the developers’ costs are rising? Let us calculate their costs. For low-level apartments, the costs are land price + construction costs at 2,000 yuan / square meter. For high-rise apartments, the costs are land price + construction costs at 2,500 yuan / square meter. Suppose here is a plot. The land price is 3,000 yuan / square meter. For constructing a high-rise apart-

ment building, the developers' costs are 3,000 yuan / square meter + 2,500 yuan / square meter = 5,500 yuan / square meter. In reality, I discovered in the sales offices of the new buildings in Futian and Luohu that the price exceeds 9,000 yuan per square meter and some exceed 10,000 yuan. If developers sell them at 10,000 per square meter, their profits are obvious. The money we make with our blood and sweat is robbed from us just like that.³³

At the end of the letter, he called on people to postpone buying houses. Zou Tao's letter attracted many supporters nationwide. According to a newspaper report on June 12, 2006, the campaign had five thousand members in Shenzhen and more than ten thousand had expressed support online. A nationwide Web-based alliance was emerging.³⁴

The other case concerns the blogger Zhou Shuguang, known as Zola in the blogosphere, who made a name for himself by covering the "nailhouse incident" in Chongqing. On April 3, 2007, after the incident was resolved by court ruling, he wrote a lengthy blog post chronicling his activities in Chongqing. The blog entry was interspersed with explanations of his motivations.³⁵ The casual and joking tone of his writing is characteristic of the new style of online contention. At the beginning of this entry, he writes,

To sum it up, I see this as a perfect ending. Though the amount of long-repressed anger gave people the impression of this being a conflict between officials and the people, it actually all blew over quietly. And me, I did something many saw as risky, but then, with a stroke of luck, I finished up my reporting without the slightest bump and, having done my job and made a name for myself, pulled out. From now on, I'll have that many more social resources to work with. I must do better in selling vegetables, get working towards a career. I have a good eye for current events, hehe . . .³⁶

Later in the entry, he mentions that because he had become famous for covering the "nailhouse" in Chongqing, he had received many requests for similar help. He wrote that he was not beneath charging a fee for providing rights-defense services to fellow citizens, because "he was not so stupid as to pretend to be a hero":

I don't want to be a free spokesperson for those evicted to make way for new development. And I don't want to let "rights defending" become the dominant narrative of my life, nor do I want to let my own casual blog become a battle-front for rights defenders. But, things in the public interest still need to be done, and those done for profit can still be done business as normal. If I succeed

in helping someone in upholding their rights, I'll still receive payment. Upholding citizen rights is something the government ought to be doing; as an individual there's no obligation for me to be doing this. And I definitely won't be so deadly stupid as the Shenzhen-based singer Cong Fei and trying doing something heroic when I'm anything but. Nobody's forcing me to be a hero. You have to fight for your own interests; rights come from being conscious and aware: no hero would want to be responsible for someone else's rights.³⁷

Toward the end of the entry, he lists matter-of-factly the technological products he used for covering the incident:

Web sites (the American server Dreamhost, 20Gs of space, 2TB of bandwidth/month, and blogging platform Wordpress)

A laptop computer

A digital camera

A mobile phone

A memory stick

A Gmail account

Skype

Video-sharing websites (Tudou.com first, then Yukou)

Photo-sharing websites (fotolog.com.cn for storage, Picasa for convenient editing)

Net bars (Chongqing net bars don't need you to show any ID)

A blog

An RSS feed (see "Zuola.com" on blogsearch.google.com, zhuaxia.com for feed delivery)

Chat tools (MSN/SKYPE/Gtalk/QQ)³⁸

Following this inventory is an even longer list of the names of people who had given him help with his reporting, including people who had spent ten or twenty yuan to buy him a meal. These lengthy quotations from Zola's blog entry show a mixture of meticulous attention to the details of his activities as well as a sense of playfulness and irreverence. They exemplify the new style of online activism.

Environmentalism: The Style of the New Citizen Activism

I suggested at the beginning of this chapter that the style of online activism reflects the style of China's new citizen activism in general. To give a sense

of the style of this new citizen activism, I now turn to a discussion of China's urban environmental movement. If the student movement in 1989 was emblematic of "old" movements in modern China, the emerging environmental movement embodies the main features of the new citizen activism.

Primarily an urban phenomenon, this movement has been in the making since 1994, when the first environmental nongovernmental organization (ENGO), Friends of Nature, was founded in Beijing. It was notable for its diverse targets and nonpolitical goals. If the archetypal social movement in the history of PRC involved direct challenges against the state and its delegates, in the environmental movement, the targets have diversified.³⁹ The environmental movement no longer clearly targets the state or even mainly the state. All individual or group behavior that damages or threatens to damage the environment may come under challenge. This includes consumer behavior, business practices, and government policies. Because the central government espouses a national policy of environmental protection and sustainable development, the environmental movement often seeks direct support from central government agencies such as the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA).⁴⁰ As in the case of consumer-rights activism,⁴¹ the state is often viewed as an ally in the fight for China's environmental protection. On its part, the central government sometimes relies on the environmental movement to expose local business practices or curb local government behavior that violates environmental laws.

The goals of the environmental movement differ from those in previous social movements. Whereas earlier movements aimed at explicit political change, the environmental movement does not directly challenge political power. It aims rather at environmental consciousness raising, environmental problem solving, and cultural change. For example, the mission of Friends of Nature is "to promote environmental protection and sustainable development in China by raising environmental awareness and initiating a 'green culture' among the public."⁴² The emphasis is on awareness raising and education. Liao Xiaoyi, director of Global Village of Beijing, claims that "I'm engaged in environmental protection and don't want to use it for political aims."⁴³ This does not mean that the environmental movement has no political intentions or consequences. Activists are engaged in policy advocacy and are fully aware that their actions and organizations represent new political developments in Chinese life. Their approach represents an environmental path to political change. Its politics revolve around environmental issues. For this reason, not only does it not pose direct threats to political power, but it enjoys considerable political legitimacy under the national policy framework of sustainable development.

The second feature is its organizational base. Whereas earlier movements had at most ephemeral movement organizations, the environmental movement consists of formal and informal organizations that operate on a routine basis. These organizations enjoy more or less legitimate status. Some are officially registered, others voluntary and unregistered, but the trend is a growing number of such organizations with expanding influences. This is a historically unprecedented phenomenon. Its main feature is the development of grassroots ENGOs.⁴⁴ Since the launching of the first ENGO in 1994, over two hundred have been founded. In addition, there were 1,116 college-student environmental associations and 1,382 government-organized ENGOs as of 2005.⁴⁵ The grassroots ENGOs are relatively independent from the state and come closest to the common understanding of civil-society organizations as autonomous, nonprofit, and voluntary.

Third, environmentalists adopt a mixed collective-action repertoire. The typical repertoire of contention in the history of the PRC includes mass demonstrations, rallies, the posting of big-character wall posters, and the linking up (*chuanlian*) of individuals. This is essentially a confrontational and provocative repertoire aimed at galvanizing public support and embarrassing and provoking authorities. It was successful for short-term massive mobilization but less so for maintaining long-term organizational strength. Today's environmentalists typically avoid confrontational methods and adopt approaches that encourage learning, cooperation, participation, and dialogue. Some of their tactics have a routinized character, including hosting public lectures, workshops, conferences, salon discussions, and field trips; mounting photography exhibitions; publishing newsletters and books, producing television programs, and so forth. These are usually conducted as "projects" (*xiangmu*), one of the many new buzzwords. The word "project" gives a sense of the routinized and institutionalized character of the activities. A project requires systematic planning, preparation, implementation, and evaluation, features not typical of traditional social movements. Closer to institutionalized than noninstitutionalized politics, this repertoire aims more at publicity and participation than at protest and disruption.⁴⁶

Litigation is also part of this new repertoire.⁴⁷ Reminiscent of what O'Brien refers to as rights-based resistance, such legal action relies on institutionalized channels. For example, legal action to protect pollution victims and fight polluting industries has been on the rise, owing to the efforts of organizations such as the Center for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims. CLAPV operates a telephone hotline that has received thousands of phone calls about environmental legal issues. It has taken more than thirty cases to

court on behalf of pollution victims, winning about half of them.⁴⁸ Although CLAPV is a unique organization, its activities have symbolic importance. They both reflect the growing rights consciousness in Chinese society and help promote it.⁴⁹ As its associate director notes, environmental litigations have been steadily on the rise and more and more people are beginning “to resort to legal weapons to protect their legitimate rights.”⁵⁰

China’s environmentalists adopt some less routinized action repertoires, such as petitions, campaigns, media exposure, and investigative trips. These activities are contentious but not disruptive. To distinguish these activities from the officially launched political campaigns of an earlier era, they are often called *xingdong* (actions) rather than *yundong* (campaigns). Thus the campaign to protect the golden monkey in 1995 was called the “Protecting the Yunnan Golden Monkey Action.” For Chinese environmentalists, besides conveying a more transitive connotation, the word “action” seems to suggest more of a grassroots initiative.

These features of the environmental movement are matched by a new style of contention, one that is plain and reasoned rather than impassioned. It contrasts with the epic style of the student movement. An example is an open letter published on the Web site of Friends of Nature and circulated online and by e-mail. Signed by sixty-one citizen organizations and ninety-nine individuals, the letter called for the public disclosure of the environmental impact assessment report on the Nu River hydropower development project.⁵¹ The letter noted that the signatories had learned that the government had reviewed the project in question and requested the public disclosure of the report: “We think that the EIA for a project such as this that affects the interests of this and future generations, that has attracted worldwide attention, and that carries potentially huge impacts should be publicly disclosed and decided with sufficient prior informed consent and evaluation, following the requirements of the relevant law and the guiding principles of the State Council.” The letter argued that not releasing the report violated existing legal statutes:

Such a decision-making process does not meet the legal requirements for public participation in China, the internationally recognized requirements for decision-making processes, the requirements of the “Administration Permission Law,” and the principles of information disclosure in the “Guidelines of Full Implementation of Law.” The EIA law, which became effective on 1 September 2003, clearly states, “The nation encourages relevant units, experts and the public to participate in the EIA process in appropriate ways.”

The letter concluded by stressing the importance of the “right to know”:

We are glad that the State Council, the National Development and Reform Commission and the local governments have taken steps to regulate hydropower development. However, to change the root cause of the current problems, a new decision-making mechanism for hydropower development should be developed, to keep all stakeholders fully informed and allow their participation. When all stakeholders gain the right to know and participate, the social and environmental impacts of hydropower development can then be properly considered, the pros and cons can then be reasonably weighed, the affected people and the environment can then be fully compensated, and alternative solutions can then be seriously considered.⁵²

Here the use of a legalistic discourse contrasts sharply with the impassioned tone typical of the manifesto-style narratives of earlier social movements.

The overriding concern of modern Chinese intellectuals is national salvation. In this endeavor to save the nation, they were compelled to introduce Western learning but were torn by the anxiety of losing the Chinese tradition. It appears that contemporary environmentalists are no longer burdened with this sense of the mission. Their goals are down to earth and as concrete as the projects they implement. This value change reflects broader changes in Chinese society. The most ironic change is that as Chinese intellectuals come to enjoy a more comfortable material life, their sense of idealism has decreased in proportion. Perhaps the rise of a consumer society and commercial culture has eroded the moral high ground of the intellectuals.

Media, Contents, and Contentious Style

Rituals, genres, style, language—all this changes slowly. What we see today are still processes in formation. But to the extent that these formations are recognizable, how to account for their emergence?

One obvious reason is the developments in media technologies and in the new cultural forms associated with them. Charles Tilly, Sidney Tarrow, and Benedict Anderson, among others, have made provocative arguments about the role of media in collective action. They all attribute the rise of modern forms of social movements, such as nationalism and translocal social movement organizations, to the development of print capitalism.⁵³ If the print media induced a modular change in social-movement style in modern society, then the new digital style of contention probably has even

more to do with media technologies. This is due to the broader reach of new media technologies today than that of print media in earlier times. It is also because the new rituals and genres of digital contention take more mediated forms. Blogs, Flash movies, e-mail lists, newsgroups, BBS forums, Web campaigns—these are mediated forms of action in ways that speech making and street theater are not. Furthermore, these mediated forms are not solely or even mainly used for contentious purposes. They are elements of the broader Internet culture put to contentious use. The culture of digital contention is embedded in that broader culture.

Although the culture of digital contention depends on the new technologies, its formation takes place in a historical process involving real people figuring out how to use the technologies. The ways in which they do so are inevitably shaped by their own history and culture. Creativity comes through practice. The innovations in the rituals, genres, and styles of digital contention I analyzed did not come about overnight. They did not appear as soon as the new media technologies became available.

It is not hard to see why. Styles and genres are embodied. Like other embodied habits, they change slowly. It takes time and effort to learn to speak and write in certain styles and genres. Once learned, they become such a natural part of us that the chances of thinking and acting outside of the familiar modes decrease. For example, a quick glance at the earliest online Chinese magazines, those run by Chinese students in North America in the early 1990s, suggests that they resemble more closely the unofficial journals published during the Democracy Wall movement than those that are being produced today. The editors, authors, and readers of the earliest online Chinese magazines and personal Web sites had grown up in the culture of print magazines and newspapers of 1980s China. The content categories, styles, and genres of writing they produced reflected the imprints of their socialization in print culture.

Thus cultural creativity was more limited in the early days of the Internet—or of any other communications technologies for that matter—because when a new technology becomes available, people are timid in using it. On the one hand, they tend to apply their existing reservoir of knowledge and skills to the use of new media. Thus they publish, for example, online versions of print magazines. On the other hand, they apply the new technologies to old jobs and familiar routines.⁵⁴ Only with growing familiarity do people begin to explore it in more adventurous and innovative ways. All this means that media technologies are essential for the appearance of the new digital culture of contention, yet it is people, not technologies, that produce the culture. More fundamental changes in all these aspects will have to await

the coming of new generations. If each historical epoch has its styles and representative genres, it means that style and genre change only with the changing of the times.

This brings me to my second point. The changes in the style of contention reflect changes in the contents of contention. This is not an argument about form reflecting content but rather one about the coevolution and mutual constitution of contents and forms. There are two aspects to this relationship. First, the culture of digital contention reflects changes in the broader landscape of popular contention in China. It is an integral part of it. If the style of online activism is less grandiose than movements of the past, it is because the broader field of citizen activism has undergone similar stylistic change. The epic style of contention is closely associated with revolutionary movements. Those movements bring challengers into daring encounters with state power. They call forth heroic acts, and heroic acts generate heroic styles. The new citizen activism is more down to earth; it is not about overthrowing state power but rather about the defense of citizenship rights, the violations of preexisting entitlements, and the building of new forms of civic association. Rightful resistance in rural areas and labor protests in some parts of China increasingly rely on legal channels of contention. So do homeowners and consumers. And as my discussion of environmentalism shows, environmentalists focus on grassroots civic action with no pretensions to grand political designs. This is not to say that contention about these issues is devoid of heroism, just that it is a different kind of heroism. This new heroism manifests itself in daily life as much as in million-strong rallies. It requires a different set of skills and competencies—such as the skills to manipulate creative media—and therefore another kind of dedication: perseverance, creative vision, long-term planning, and even transnational competence.⁵⁵

Second, these changes reflect structural transformations in Chinese society and politics. Raymond Williams saw “significant correlations between the relative stability of forms, institutions, and social systems generally.” He wrote:

Most stable forms, of the kind properly recognizable as collective, belong to social systems which can also be characterized as relatively collective and stable. Most mobile, innovative, and experimental forms belong to social systems in which these new characteristics are evident or even dominant. Periods of major transition between social systems are commonly marked by the emergence of radically new forms, which eventually settle in and come to be shared.⁵⁶

The transformations in contemporary China undoubtedly mark a period of major historical transition. The new forms of contention are related to these transformations. For one thing, Chinese politics is changing, with growing segmentation between the central government and local authorities. The forms and practices of political power are changing. More sophisticated, disciplinary forms have appeared even as repressive power remains strong. Thus the new culture of digital contention responds to the new forms of power. Furthermore, the crisis of identity and community and the expansion and deepening of social grievances compel citizens to expand their channels of expression and to innovate contentious forms. Finally, the coming of age of the cohort born after the economic reform means that a new generation is beginning to take up activism, as evidenced in the volunteerism among college students in the wake of the Sichuan earthquakes in May 2008. Members of this generation have only faint memories of movements of the past.⁵⁷ Although they work along with, and learn from, their parents' generation, their life experiences are fundamentally different. They inevitably bring new elements into activism. In short, just as shifts in literary styles mark changes in the literary scene, so changes in the styles of contention both reflect and produce social and political change.

Conclusion

This chapter argues that the style of popular contention has undergone a shift since the 1990s. Whereas earlier social movements manifested an epic style, the style of the new citizen activism is more playful and prosaic. Online activism both embodies this new style and contributes to its formation. The changing styles of contention reflect changes in the contents of contention, specifically changes in society and in the institutions and practices of power.

The digital culture of contention marks the appearance of a new sensibility of citizens' relationship to power and authority. To be sure, nothing can be more defiant than life-threatening heroism in the face of repressive power. Yet it is also true that in earlier movements, that sense of defiance was often mixed with an authoritarian mentality that masked a reverence for the same authority under challenge. I make no claim that the new digital culture is completely free of such a mentality. Yet my analysis of the rituals, genres, and styles of digital contention reveal a new spirit. It is a spirit of irreverence, not authoritarianism. Digital contention of all stripes holds power and authority in scorn. Nothing is sacred in cyberspace, where profanation prevails. And a spirit of profanation may be a necessary cultural condition for a more

profound transformation of citizen-state relations. Political transformation may well begin with a new cultural revolution, and online activism represents nothing less. The multiplication of rituals, speech genres, language, style, and voices challenges and erodes the state's discursive and ideological hegemony. No one fails to see how the new forms of online contention—indeed in Chinese Internet culture more generally—are seeping into the broader cultural sphere and changing people's ways of thinking and talking. The culture of online activism contributes to this change in sensibility.

This chapter highlights another neglected aspect in the cultural analysis of social movements: style. If stories, images, rhetoric, symbols, rituals, and language are so central to understanding the cultural production and expressions of contention, a stylistic analysis promises even more. One weakness in current work is an inattention to the relations *among* the images, stories, rhetoric, symbols, and rituals associated with particular movements, campaigns, or historical periods. There is also a neglect of their relations with the *contents* of contention, such as ideologies, organization, and goals. Studying the style of contention promises to uncover these relations. Style is the underlying unity of diverse elements. The “voice” of a particular novelist is his or her style.⁵⁸ That voice is the total effect of the diverse elements of a particular work. Such is also the case with social movements. My exploration of the stylistic changes in modern social movements in China is a preliminary step toward a stylistic analysis of social movements. By revealing the changes in the styles of contention, I have shown a host of other related changes in Chinese society, from media, to the state, and to people's new conceptions of power and authority.