

Contesting Food Safety in the Chinese Media: Between Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony

Guobin Yang*

Abstract

Food safety is a matter of intense contestation in the Chinese media. Through three case studies, this article shows that government and corporate elites strive to maintain media hegemony while citizen-consumers and activists engage in counter-hegemonic practices. Under conditions of hegemony, citizen dissent is most likely to take one of two forms: diffused contention or radical protest. Like the *yin* and *yang* of civic dissent, these two forms are both the results of, and responses to, state and corporate hegemony.

Keywords: media; Weibo; internet; food safety; Sanlu; China

In recent years, the number of food safety incidents has risen sharply in China. From the melamine-tainted baby formula in 2008 to colour-painted buns and cooking oil recycled from food waste, food safety scandals are now staple news. However, more news does not necessarily mean more transparency in the Chinese media. The apparent explosion of information masks two hidden realities. First, although some food safety incidents are exposed in the media, others are not publicized, or publicized only after serious efforts to block the information have failed. Second, even after the information blockade is broken, powerful political and corporate interests will still attempt to control and frame the information communicated to the public.

Drawing on the Gramscian concept of hegemony, this article analyses contestation over food safety issues as hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practices. Through three case studies, I show that government and corporate elites strive to maintain hegemony over food safety information, while citizen-consumers and activists engage in counter-hegemonic practices. Under conditions of hegemony, citizen dissent takes the form of either diffused contention or radical protest. Diffused contention is literally scattered, unfocused, individualized and not oriented to collective action. The suppression of dissent induces diffused contention. When even channels for diffused contention are closed, activists may be forced to take more radical action. With a confrontational character, direct

* University of Pennsylvania. Email: gyang@asc.upenn.edu.

protest is most likely to happen when the cases involve serious perceived or actual harm to health; when there are individuals emerging as leaders;¹ and when government or corporate entities under challenge are in denial or are not responsive.

The three cases selected for this study are the Sanlu 三鹿 tainted milk scandal in 2008; citizen responses to food safety issues on the internet in 2010; and a public controversy concerning the Changyu 张裕 Group's wine products in 2012. Sanlu's melamine-contaminated baby formula caused the deaths of six infants and illness in about 300,000 children.² This case sparked protest activities, organized by Zhao Lianhai 赵连海 and other parents of affected children, to seek justice and compensation. The online discussions about food safety, which I collected from Sina's microblogging platform, Weibo 微博, on 9 February 2010, took place after Sanlu's tainted milk products reappeared on the market two years after the initial scandal. The Changyu controversy occurred in August 2012 after an internet posting about pesticide residues found in Changyu's wine products caused a near collapse of Changyu's stocks.

These cases are not necessarily representative of food safety incidents in China today. However, each in its own way illustrates important features of current contestations over food safety issues. In a sense, the Sanlu milk scandal is an extreme case: few other cases have caused such severe harm to so many young children. Yet, for this very reason, it reveals in especially stark ways the seriousness and contested nature of food safety issues. The other two cases, which are less radical and less extreme, are selected for comparative purposes. They reveal dimensions of hegemony and counter-hegemony which are not as salient as in the Sanlu case. I collected data on the three cases from the Chinese Core Newspapers Database, through keyword searches using Chinese internet search engines, and through my personal observations of Chinese online communities.³

Food Safety and Media

Most current work on food safety in China focuses on regulations and policy, with scholars attributing food safety problems to poor regulation and lax enforcement.⁴ There is little research on the public monitoring of food safety regulators and the food industry or how citizen-consumers communicate about food

1 On protest leadership, see Li and O'Brien 2008.

2 The media reported that there were six deaths and 300,000 children diagnosed with kidney ailments related to the consumption of melamine-tainted baby formula. See Times Topics "Melamine: China tainted baby formula scandal," *The New York Times*, 4 March 2011.

3 As a source of data, online discourse has both advantages and disadvantages. Internet users in China are relatively young and urban. Thus, a sample of online discourse is by no means representative of the discourse of the Chinese public in general. It is nonetheless a valuable new type of data. As it happens in "natural" settings of online forums, online discourse has the qualities of ethnographic data, hence the appearance of online or virtual ethnography as a new research methodology. See Hine 2000. Another compelling reason for studying online discourse is that, with a dynamic internet culture and the lack of other channels for expression, citizens increasingly turn to the internet as a space for expression and action. Missing it would mean missing an important new field of social action.

4 Ellis and Turner 2008; Broughton and Walker 2010; Pei et al. 2011; McBeath and McBeath 2010.

safety problems. However, in today's media age, most consumers are likely to experience food safety problems through the media rather than directly. The relationship between food safety and the media is therefore of critical concern.

Results from random searches on the Chinese search engine Baidu 百度 and in Chinese newspaper databases suggest that food safety is a frequent topic of news and discussion in the Chinese media, including the internet. My keyword search for *shipin anquan* 食品安全 (food safety) on Baidu on 19 November 2012 returned more than 89 million results. Among the top search results were items like “what are the main food safety incidents in 2011?” and “food safety incidents in 2012.” “Food safety incidents” (*shipin anquan shijian* 食品安全事件) are suddenly exposed food safety problems, such as the melamine-tainted baby formula case in 2008. Otherwise unknown to the public, they become “incidents” by being exposed by the mainstream media or on the internet. As the internet becomes a hotbed for exposing food safety problems, government agencies, research institutions and commercial public relations firms in China have begun to monitor “internet sentiments” (*wangluo yuqing* 网络舆情) related to food safety in order to manage such crises more effectively. The Xinhua News Agency website, for example, maintains an active section on *yuqing* 舆情 (public sentiments/public opinion) with daily and weekly news releases about popular internet postings about various social issues. Food safety issues appear often in these short reports.⁵

The same holds for newspapers. Table 1 shows the results of a keyword search for *shipin anquan* in the Chinese Core Newspapers Database of the Chinese company, Tsinghua-TongFang 清华同方, conducted on 23 March 2008, for the period 2000–2007. Another search, conducted on 19 November 2012 in the same Chinese Core Newspapers' Database, yields the results shown in Table 2.⁶ The abrupt drop in 2008 may be owing to missing newspapers in the database at the time of my search, although it may also partly reflect a decrease in the media coverage of food safety issues in the year of the Beijing Olympics. However, apart from the abnormalities of 2008, the general trend from 2000 to the present is for a steady increase in media coverage of food safety issues. This trend reflects the growing prevalence and severity of food safety problems in China.⁷ There is also evidence that the officially-controlled mass media systematically frames issues in particular ways, while business corporations aggressively seek to block information and deceive the public. Thus, although the growing coverage of food safety issues may signal some degree of “opening up” in the Chinese media,⁸ the reality is more complicated.

5 See <http://news.xinhuanet.com/yuqing>.

6 The number of newspapers included in the database changes from time to time, as do search results.

7 Yunxiang Yan's description of unsafe and poisonous foods shows the seriousness of the problems. See Yan 2012.

8 On the changing media landscape, see chapters in Shirk 2010.

Table 1: Frequency of “*shipin anquan*” (Food Safety) in Core Newspapers, 2000–2007

Year	Frequency
2000	277
2001	840
2002	2,162
2003	3,473
2004	6,356
2005	12,301
2006	13,129
2007	23,359

Note:

Search conducted on 23 March 2008.

Table 2: Frequency of “*shipin anquan*” (Food Safety) in Core Newspapers, 2008–2011

Year	Frequency
2008	4,745
2009	19,058
2010	17,911
2011	28,515

Note:

Search conducted on 19 November 2012.

Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony in the Chinese Media

The Gramscian concept of hegemony provides a useful perspective for critical analysis. For Gramsci, the dominant class of a society governs through “the combination of force and consent variously balancing one another.”⁹ Rule by consent, which takes the form of “intellectual and moral leadership,”¹⁰ is hegemony. Because the manufacturing of consent depends significantly on the mass media, the media is a crucial arena of contestation. As hegemonic powers try to dominate the media by excluding alternative views, counter-hegemonic elements engage in practices of “disorganizing consent and organizing dissent.”¹¹

Newspapers, television, radio and magazines are all means for the manufacturing of consent under the control of the party-state. Even the internet, which was initially seized by citizens and activists as an alternative medium, has been increasingly penetrated by political and commercial powers.¹² Yet, as many scholars have argued, media control in China is not monolithic, but is full of contradictions and uncertainties.¹³ Media institutions at central and local levels

9 Gramsci 1995, 261.

10 Ibid., 249.

11 Caroll and Ratner 1996, 602.

12 Jiang 2010; Yang 2012.

13 Zhao, Yuezhi 2008; Zhang, Xiaoling 2011.

experience control differently and have different ways of negotiating it. To varying degrees, they are all subject to the competitive logic of the news market, as is reflected in the growing interest in programme ratings.¹⁴ Journalists are also engaged in practices of bounded innovation and improvisation in “a joint adventure into some unknown terrain for both the party-state authority and media practitioners.”¹⁵ In spite of controls, the internet still provides more access to citizens than other media types. In short, the Chinese media is hegemonic but not without centrifugal or counter-hegemonic impulses.

Official responses to the changing media ecology were initially reactive and panicky, as shown by the repeated and sometimes abortive efforts to block such news as the outbreak of the SARs epidemic in 2003. Gradually, however, official strategies have become more proactive and hegemonic.¹⁶ The efforts of the Xinhua News Agency to monitor food safety *yuqing*, as mentioned above, form part of these strategies. They aim at a better understanding of the incidents for more effective control and containment.

Another example is the recent initiative to shape public opinion by encouraging government agencies to register accounts on Sina Weibo.¹⁷ In September 2011, the Ministry of Public Security held a national conference in Beijing on the functions of microblogs, at which a deputy minister urged public security officials to use Weibo. At that point, there were 4,000 official Weibo accounts and 5,000 individual police officers’ accounts.¹⁸ By December 2012, government agencies and individuals had opened over 60,000 accounts on Sina Weibo, which were reportedly exerting more and more social influence.¹⁹

Counter-hegemony exists in relation to hegemony. China today is witnessing multiple forms of counter-hegemony among diverse social groups concerning many different issues, such as pollution-induced protest, homeowners’ rights defence, labour activism, civic charity and NGO-led activism. Counter-hegemony in the area of food safety lies at two ends of a spectrum. At one end is radical protest, represented by the campaign led by Zhao Lianhai, discussed below. At the other end is diffused contention on the internet. These two forms are both the results of, and responses to, state and corporate hegemony. With a vocal and confrontational character, radical protest happens in cases of serious perceived or actual harm, and often depends on some form of leadership. The nature of government responses, especially non-responsive or repressive behaviour, may radicalize dissent.²⁰

14 Yuan and Ksiazek 2011.

15 Pan 2010, 191.

16 Yang 2013.

17 Ma 2013; Yang 2013.

18 *China Daily* 2011.

19 Sina.com.cn. 2012. “Renmin yuqing fabu 2012 Sina zhengwu weibo baogao” (*People’s Daily* media opinion office releases 2012 report on government microblogging on Weibo), <http://news.sina.com.cn/m/news/roll/2012-12-03/092525716935.shtml>. Accessed 3 December 2012.

20 Li and O’Brien (2008) similarly find that in rural protests repressive government behaviour may force protesters to adopt more confrontational tactics.

Expressions of diffused contention are part of the everyday conversations among Chinese internet users, or netizens (*wangmin* 网民).²¹ They appear in various online forums and, if driven out of one website, may easily re-emerge in another. Like everyday conversations, they are hard to censor and may even be tolerated by censors.²² In aggregate form, they offer critical perspectives that deconstruct the hegemonic discourse in mainstream media.

The Sanlu Milk Scandal

On 11 September 2008, Shanghai's *Oriental Morning News* carried a story about 14 one-year-old infants in Gansu province being diagnosed with kidney stones. The story linked the illnesses to the melamine-tainted baby formula produced by the Sanlu Group. Subsequent investigations found that six children had died and about 300,000 had been hospitalized owing to the consumption of baby formula tainted with the industrial chemical melamine. Nationwide, 22 dairy firms were found to have produced tainted baby formula.

By exposing the scandalous behaviour of a leading brand name in China's milk industry, the story triggered a national media blitz. On 17 and 18 September 2008, leading suspects, including Sanlu's general manager, Tian Wenhua 田文华, were detained by the police. Several municipal-level government officials in the city of Shijiazhuang 石家庄 (where the Sanlu Group was based) were removed from their positions. The Sanlu Group was subsequently declared bankrupt. In the end, three men were sentenced to death for producing and selling hundreds of tons of tainted milk powder, while Tian Wenhua received life imprisonment.²³

Meanwhile, the parents of harmed children met with difficulty in their quest for justice and compensation. On 27 December 2008, the 22 firms found to have produced tainted milk proposed a compensation package for the affected families.²⁴ According to the Xinhua News Agency, as of 23 January 2009, 262,600 parents, or 90.7 per cent of all parents of affected children, accepted the compensation package.²⁵ Those who rejected the compensation offer viewed it as a secret deal made between business firms and government agencies. Before discussing compensation, they wanted a clear answer about the short-term and long-term effects of tainted milk powder on their children's health. Zhao Lianhai, whose three-year-old son had been diagnosed with kidney stones, started organizing a collective protest. About a year after commencing his campaign,

21 I follow current practice in China in calling Chinese internet users "netizens." On the meaning and perceived power of netizens, see Hu 2008.

22 Some scholars find that internet censors target only postings that call for collective action and allow individual criticisms of government behaviour. See King, Pan and Roberts forthcoming.

23 Vause, John. 2009. "Death sentences in China tainted milk case," http://articles.cnn.com/2009-01-22/world/china.tainted.milk_1_sanlu-group-tian-wenhua-chinese-dairy?_s=PM:WORLD. Accessed 30 March 2013.

24 Xu, Zhiyong 2008.

25 *People's Daily* Overseas Edition. "Compensation work for milk powder incident close to end," 24 January 2009, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrbhwb/html/2009-01/24/content_182453.htm. Accessed 30 March 2013.

Zhao was arrested on 13 November 2009. A year later, on 10 November 2010, he was tried and sentenced to two and a half years in prison for “disturbing social order.”²⁶

The Sanlu milk scandal raised serious questions. Why did news exposure come only after so many children had contracted kidney stones? How did the mass media report the scandal? Why did the parents’ campaign led by Zhao Lianhai fail? The answer to these questions is a combined state and corporate hegemony. This hegemony took three forms: suppressing information, framing issues and repressing dissidents.

Corporate and State Hegemony

In March 2008, the Sanlu Group had already received consumer complaints about its baby formula products, yet Sanlu still publicly claimed that their products had passed the required quality tests. On 20 May 2008, an internet user, going by the name “78900880088,” posted a long message on one of the bulletin boards of the popular online community, Tianya 天涯. The posting described the abnormal symptoms of his 13-year-old daughter who had consumed Sanlu’s baby formula. Instead of acknowledging the quality problems in their products, Sanlu again tried to suppress the information. Sanlu’s regional manager located 78900880088 and promised him compensation in exchange for his agreement to delete the posting.²⁷

Sanlu continued to suppress negative information about its products after this. On 1 August 2008, while confirming that melamine had been blended into their products, Sanlu requested the Shijiazhuang municipal government to “increase control and coordination of the media, to create a good environment for the recall of the company’s problem products.”²⁸ On 9 September 2008, *Lanzhou Morning News* reported that 14 infants in Gansu province had been diagnosed with kidney stones. The story linked their condition to milk powder but did not name the company or the brand of the baby formula. Sanlu acted quickly and reportedly offered China’s main internet search engine Baidu three million yuan to censor negative information about Sanlu on the internet.²⁹

Government authorities were aware of the situation prior to September 2008. In June 2008, the General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine (GAQSIQ), the central regulatory agency in this area, received consumer complaints about Sanlu’s baby formula products, but failed to take

26 Soon after the trial, Zhao was placed on medical parole and disengaged himself from activism.

27 The internet user reportedly contacted Tianya’s management to request the removal of the posting. Instead of deleting the posting, Tianya’s management reportedly locked its comment functionality to prevent readers from commenting on it. This limited the impact of the posting. Why Tianya management did not delete the posting at that point is not known. At time of writing, the posting was still accessible on Tianya. See <http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/free/1/1262292.shtml>. For an analysis of Sanlu’s PR strategies, see Jiao 2008.

28 Blanchard 2008.

29 Baidu allegedly rejected the offer. See Oster and Chao 2008.

immediate action to alert the public. In fact, government authorities may have suppressed information about the milk scandal because of a concern with China's national image in the days leading up to the Beijing Olympic Games.³⁰

It was a courageous journalist, named Jian Guangzhou 简光洲, who exposed the Sanlu scandal with a story published in Shanghai's *Oriental Morning News* on 11 September 2008. Jian was the first journalist to name Sanlu in a newspaper story.³¹ Chinese investigative journalists aspiring to practise professional ideals have created an informal journalistic culture of publishing investigative journalism in local rather than national news channels.³² They are the dissidents from within hegemonic media institutions.

After Jian's story was published, the media agenda shifted from suppressing information to framing it. A comparative analysis by a Chinese media scholar of the coverage in the *People's Daily Online* and *The New York Times* shows that the *People's Daily Online* delivers primarily positive messages, while *The New York Times* conveys negative messages. From 11 September to 31 October 2008, the *People's Daily Online* (people.com.cn) carried 159 articles about the Sanlu milk scandal, while *The New York Times* had 31. Nearly half of the articles on the *People's Daily Online* are about how government agencies tackled the crisis. The message is that the government acted quickly and responsibly after the scandal was exposed. Only 3.5 per cent of the articles contain information about the conditions of the sick children, and only 2.5 per cent mention the public's response to the scandal.³³

A study of the coverage of the *Legal Daily* shows similar results. From 13 September to 6 November 2008, the *Legal Daily* carries 66 stories about the Sanlu milk scandal. Of these, 41 stories were written by its own reporters, while 25 were reprints of news releases by the Xinhua News Agency. Again, most of these stories report the government's responses and measures; almost none reports the situation or viewpoint of the families of the affected children.³⁴

Radical Protest

The more government and corporate powers try to build hegemony, the less they can tolerate radical dissent. Thus, when citizens began to campaign for the rights of the victims' families, government authorities resorted to repression. This was the context in which Zhao Lianhai was apprehended for his campaign.

30 Reporters Without Borders 2008.

31 In an interview, Jian talked about his initial hesitancy about whether to name Sanlu and how he had made up his mind once he had witnessed the suffering of the young children and their parents during his investigation trip to Gansu. See "Meiti de Sanlu zhi shi" (Media faults in covering Sanlu), *Qingnian zazhi*, October 2008, http://www.qnjz.com/xwcz/200811/t20081110_4096958.htm. Accessed 12 November 2012.

32 Zhao, Yuezhi 2008; Tong, Jingrong 2012.

33 Dai 2010.

34 Wu 2009.

The protest surrounding the Sanlu case involved the parents of affected children who were seeking justice and compensation. It sprang from a conjunction of several conditions. The serious harm done to large numbers of young children provoked the anger of both parents and the general public. Such sentiments are evident from the results of my keyword search on Weibo in 2010 (discussed below). Also important was the emergence of Zhao Lianhai as a protest leader and organizer. The frustrations he repeatedly experienced with government authorities and the sharply different responses he received on Twitter led to his radicalization.

Zhao began his campaign by writing blogs and launching websites. After over a decade of internet activism in China, citizens and dissidents habitually turn to the internet to vent their grievances, and, indeed, the internet has become the main channel for public expression for ordinary citizens. Two days after his son was diagnosed with kidney stones, Zhao wrote his first blog calling on families to organize and fight for justice. On 25 September 2008, he launched a website called *duniunai.com* (poisonous milk), which he was soon forced to rename as *jieshibaobao.com* (kidney-stone babies) because of the hostile tone of “poisonous milk.” In his blog announcing the launch of the website, Zhao wrote: “I hope using the horrible ‘poisonous milk’ as the name of this website will not bring more pain and more tears to the parents on earth ... Let us remember ‘poisonous milk,’ and remember the insults and sadness we experienced.”³⁵ The process of radicalization experienced by Zhao was similar to that described by Fu and Cullen in their study of *weiquan* 维权 (rights protection) lawyers.³⁶

One of the parents’ demands was to be told of the full health consequences of consuming melamine-contaminated milk. On 4 December 2008, a one-year-old baby from Hubei died of kidney failure. Suspecting that it was directly caused by the consumption of melamine-contaminated milk, the child’s parents, with the backing of Zhao’s campaign, requested an autopsy to find out the cause of the child’s death.³⁷ After their request was rejected, Zhao stepped up his campaign. In an open letter published on his website on 25 December 2008, he pleaded with the China Dairy Industry Association, the Dairy Association of China and dairy firms to help save the children afflicted by the illness. To mobilize public support, Zhao planned a news conference on 2 January 2009. However, the day before the event, he was taken into custody by public security authorities.

The abrupt announcement of the bankruptcy of the Sanlu Group on 4 March 2009 by the intermediate court of Shijiazhuang dealt another blow to Zhao’s campaign. The bankruptcy ruling turned Sanlu’s assets over to another dairy business group, Sanyuan 三元, and left parents with no legal entity from which

35 www.duniunai.com. 25 September 2008. The website is no longer accessible. Document on file with author.

36 Fu and Cullen 2011.

37 Zhao, Lianhai 2010.

to seek compensation. Zhao and other parents saw this move as a way to exonerate government officials and block efforts to seek compensation.

Faced with these setbacks, as well as growing pressure from public security authorities, Zhao Lianhai adopted a more radical approach. In June 2009, he started an online campaign to collect signatures for an open letter to the Supreme Court. On 7 July 2009, he opened a Twitter account and announced a campaign to make 11 September a day of food safety, child safety and national shame in China. He considered the exposure of the Sanlu scandal on 11 September 2008 as China's "9/11." His campaign website, www.china911.org, was swiftly shut down by the government. On 9 September 2009, together with three other parents, Zhao went to the Supreme Court to submit an open letter, only to be turned away. On 11 September 2009, Zhao organized a candlelight vigil to remember the children who had died of kidney failure.

Zhao Lianhai continued to post reports of these activities on his Twitter account.³⁸ He had turned to Twitter when domestic websites were closed to his campaign. His Twitter account quickly attracted many followers,³⁹ including domestic human rights activists, exiled democracy activists and journalists from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the United States. For Zhao, these Twitter followers were an attentive and supportive audience, an important factor for his persistent activism.

Partly in response to the increasingly repressive state responses he encountered, and partly because of the moral support he received on Twitter, Zhao then resorted to more radical language and action.⁴⁰ Through interactions with his Twitter followers, he became part of a larger network of political activists who were engaged in more subversive issues than food safety, such as promoting a democratic system in China. Zhao was gradually drawn into issues considered as extremely subversive by the regime. He began to take more radical forms of action in his own campaign, such as petitioning for the launch of a Chinese day of 9/11. He also actively participated in campaigns run by other activists on Twitter, including the petition for the release of the imprisoned Nobel Peace laureate, Liu Xiaobo 刘晓波. By linking his politically charged campaign to even more politically charged issues, he found moral support from a network of activists on Twitter. The transnationalization of his campaign contributed to his radicalization and hastened its repression.

Weibo Sentiments as Counter-Hegemony

Counter-hegemony may appear in radical or diffused forms. Zhao Lianhai's protest had a clear confrontational form, involving direct conflicts with government

38 Twitter was and is still blocked in China, but may be accessed by using circumvention technologies.

39 He had over 8,000 followers at the time of his last message before his arrest, which was posted on 13 November 2010 by his wife.

40 On why Twitter has become a hotbed for Chinese dissidents despite the fact that it is blocked in China, see Yang 2013.

and business entities.⁴¹ Diffused counter-hegemonic practices are scattered and individualized rather than focused and organized. Views and sentiments about food safety expressed by Weibo users are diffused counter-hegemonic practices.

To understand these sentiments, I conducted a keyword search for “food safety” on Sina Weibo on 9 February 2010. Since its launch in August 2009, Sina Weibo has become the most popular microblogging platform in China, boasting about 300 million subscribers by mid-2012.⁴² My search yielded 23 pages of results on the Weibo website.⁴³ Posted between 3 September 2009 and 9 February 2010, these messages represent the sentiments of those who began to use Weibo in its first year – the early adopters. Early adopters tend to be internet-savvy, young and urban, and more adventurous and outspoken than the general populace.

Many contaminated foodstuffs and beverages were mentioned in the search results. They included bottled water, soda drinks, GM foodstuffs, GM corn, organic food, recycled gutter oil (*digou you* 地沟油) used in cooking, packaged water, rice noodles, vegetables, eggs (with Sudan dyes), milk candy, crackers, salt with potassium ferrocyanide, jelly, fruit juice, sesame oil, and hotpot lamb. The main food safety issue, however, was tainted milk powder. When I conducted the search, news about the return of tainted milk powder had just appeared. After the Sanlu Group went bankrupt in early 2009, its tainted products were not completely destroyed. Two years later, some of the very same tainted products found their way back onto the market.

What did people say about food safety on Weibo? My search results indicate strong expressions of anger as well as of resignation and cynicism, as shown by the following two examples:

There is too much talk about food safety, too much already. It's hopeless. Manufacturers still do as they like. The supervisory agencies are still absent. Common folks – just pray for your own luck. We don't have the safe “specially provided foodstuffs” (*tegong shipin* 特供食品) available to the privileged. We can only toughen up our own stomachs. Perhaps eventually we will evolve into some alien forms. (1 February 2010)

This time, the public's right to know is still treated like children's play [i.e. not taken seriously]. We learned of the truth only several months after [inspection authorities] discovered that poisonous milk powder products were being sold on the market. Despite the food safety rectification campaign two years ago, poisonous milk powder still easily finds its way onto the market. All explanations are now pale and useless. All reasoning is futile. (5 February 2010)

This sense of resignation partly explains why there were few calls for collective action, and why the few calls that were made came to nothing. One person demanded the resignation of the health minister: “[I'm] so angry! I strongly demand that Chen Zhu, minister of health and head of the National Food

41 Scholars of rhetoric have identified confrontation as a prominent form of social movement. See Cathcart 1978.

42 For two studies of Sina Weibo, see Sullivan 2012 and Tong and Lei 2013.

43 They take up about 200 pages of a Word document and contain 1,102 main tweets. Sina Weibo allows users to add comments when re-tweeting a message, which means one tweet may contain more than one message. Twitter does not have this function.

Safety Rectification Office, resign” (1 February 2010). Another message, which was forwarded hundreds of times, jokingly requested the government “to monitor food safety and mine safety as strictly as the internet” (8 February 2010). A call for a symbolic boycott of milk for 100 days, issued by none other than the journalist who exposed the Sanlu scandal, received about 200 responses. One response suggested that it was more important to reform the administration system:

I saw that some people have called for the boycotting of milk. I feel it is even more important to launch a movement calling for the thorough reform of the food safety administration system in our country. I am a practitioner in the food industry. I feel deeply that the food safety administration agencies only charge lots of money for stamping licenses ... and are never really engaged in supervision and management. (5 February 2010)

Experts on food safety or health did not have any visible role in shaping Weibo sentiments. Of the 15 most popular messages in my sample (those that were forwarded more than 50 times), none was posted by a food safety or health expert. They were all posted by journalists or popular bloggers. This may be because food or health experts were not active Weibo users at the time of my research, but it also shows that journalists in official media institutions may serve as key voices of dissent on the internet.⁴⁴

Many conversations were about attributing blame. Dairy firms were obvious culprits. For example, one tweet stressed their unscrupulous nature: “To make money, these unscrupulous merchants wouldn’t even spare children” (1 February 2010). Another accused dairy firms of playing the nationalism card to gain public sympathy for their wrongdoing:

I completely lost hope in the so-called “national enterprises.” When the Sanlu melamine incident first happened, it quickly spread to most other dairy firms. These firms all tried to seek public sympathy and pity in the name of national enterprises. This time, when poisonous milk powder appeared again, there was again this talk about “national enterprises.” Are they murdering this nation or reviving it? Isn’t this obvious? (3 February 2010)

Although netizens challenged dairy firms, by far the most blame was put on government agencies and officials. Netizens accused government officials of negating their responsibilities for the tainted milk scandals:

Yesterday, within one week of the news about the return of poisonous milk powder to the market, the Xinwen Lianbo [news programme] shows the No. 1 boss of the General Administration of Quality Supervision and Inspection saying that, in 2009, there was no major food safety incident in our country and that 98% of the products selected for quality inspection passed the test. I was truly speechless. (7 February 2010)

Others on Weibo noted that government officials denied responsibility by pointing to the global nature of food safety problems and implying they were not unique to China:

National leaders responsible for tackling food safety issues reiterated that food safety is a global issue ... that it exists not only in developing nations, but also in developed countries. (4 February 2010)

44 See Yu 2011 on how Chinese journalists, as gatekeepers of the mainstream media, turn from gatekeeping to “gatewatching” in the blogosphere.

Why did Weibo users blame the government more than business firms for China's food safety problems? My search results suggest that Chinese citizens see fundamental flaws in state regulation of business firms, in government accountability and in the political system.

First, many did not believe that the government agencies supervised the dairy industry properly. Below is a sarcastic comment:

The national food safety agency said it would thoroughly investigate and resolutely destroy the "problem milk powder" in 2008. Some netizens commented: destroy [problem milk powder] in 2009, resolutely destroy in 2010, definitely destroy in 2011, really destroy in 2012, undoubtedly destroy in 2013 ... thoroughly destroy in 2050. This is not a food safety agency, but a swindlers' agency. (1 February 2010)

Another comment expressed similar sentiments:

Food safety crises happen frequently in China. If there is no rigorous supervision and administration, they will continue to happen. If the people of a country have lost any sense of safety about their food, dare I ask how much trust is left in this society? Where are the quality inspection agencies? What are they up to? Why do they always show up after the fact? How can we ever feel safe? (1 February 2010)

Netizens also resented the lack of government accountability. One person wrote that many serious food safety incidents happened during the seven- or eight-year tenure of the head of GAQSIQ, yet instead of being held accountable, he was simply transferred to another high-level government position (9 February 2010).

Finally, netizens argued that the governance system itself prevented agencies from doing their job:

Why has poisonous milk powder re-emerged? ... The key to poisonous milk powder is the government's ability to govern. (6 February 2010)

The ability to supervise food safety directly matches the government's ability to govern. The fundamental issue at stake in this melamine contamination case is the government's ability to rule. (2 February 2010)

People saw the root cause of food safety problems as a governance issue, and consequently frequently mentioned the crisis of governance. Some thought that food safety problems would trigger large-scale social disturbances and threaten regime stability. Although health risks were mentioned, many more people discussed social and political consequences:

If the food safety problem is still not solved in China, it will surely become the biggest problem affecting harmony and stability. (9 February 2010)

To tackle the problem of food safety ... it is not enough to attack businesses that produce fake products ... Unless corrupt officials in this sector are dealt with, we will never dare to let our kids use milk powder. (1 February 2010)

In a broader sense, attributing blame to the government reflects the contemporary culture of distrust. As Yunxiang Yan argues, food safety problems "have contributed to a rapid decline of social trust, thus posing a risk of distrust that has far-reaching social and political ramifications."⁴⁵ Another possible reason for the harsh criticisms of government found in food safety-related discourse on

45 Yan 2012, 707.

Weibo is that internet censors allow a fair degree of criticism as long as netizens do not call for collective action.⁴⁶ This would mean that the diffused forms of counter-hegemonic practices are appropriated by hegemonic forces as ways of neutralizing direct challenges.⁴⁷ This possibility further complicates the relationship between hegemony and counter-hegemony in China's media ecology today.

The Changyu Wine Controversy

The contestations over the Sanlu milk scandal were not exceptional, but are indicative of general trends in controversies over food safety issues. A case concerning the famous wine producer, the Changyu Wine Group, serves as further illustration.

On 9 August 2012, a posting on Weibo reported that *Capital Market Weekly's* new issue, to be released the following day, would carry a story about three major wine producers whose products were found to contain pesticide residues. It said that the worst of the three cases concerned the Changyu Wine Group, whose products contained more pesticide residues than the other two. This posting triggered a 9.83 per cent drop in Changyu's stocks on 10 August.⁴⁸ However, when the stock exchange opened again on Monday, 13 August, Changyu's stocks rebounded and it survived a potentially devastating crisis.

Public relations analysts view this as a successful case of corporate crisis management.⁴⁹ Indeed, the Changyu Group lost no time in launching a corporate publicity campaign to discredit the Weibo story and pledge the safety of its products. For this purpose, it enlisted the support of government agencies and experts from industry associations. While Changyu spearheaded all the publicity efforts, it was clear that government agencies were behind the company. In the Sanlu case, government authorities first tried to suppress information; in the Changyu case, government agencies supported Changyu's publicity campaign. In both cases, the goal was to control critical information in order to shape public opinion in ways favourable to government and corporate interests.

In the afternoon of 10 August, the Changyu Group held a news conference in the city of Yantai 烟台, where it is based. On that occasion, representatives from both the central and local government wine quality inspection agencies assured consumers that the pesticide residues in Changyu's wine products were lower than the standards set by the European Union and therefore were completely safe. The promised story in the *Capital Market Weekly* was never published, reportedly because of pressure exerted by the Changyu Group. On 11 August 2012, the Changyu Group held another news conference in the prestigious Diaoyutai State Guesthouse 钓鱼台国宾馆 in Beijing. The Diaoyutai State Guesthouse is a venue for important state and diplomatic occasions and thus

46 King, Pan, and Roberts forthcoming.

47 My thanks to Anna Lora-Wainwright for suggesting this possibility.

48 http://news.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2012-08/12/c_123570985.htm

49 Long 2012.

had symbolic significance, demonstrating Changyu's power and resources in securing an important venue at short notice. Representatives from the China Alcoholic Drinks Association and the China National Food Industry Association spoke at the conference, again assuring consumers that the pesticide residues in tested samples were lower than EU standards. To expel any further doubts about its products, the general manager of the Changyu Group made the preposterous claim that only if one drank 123 bottles of its wine on a single day would it be harmful to health.⁵⁰

The Changyu Group's PR efforts extended to the internet. In its pages on economy, Xinhua's official website set aside a special section on the Changyu wine controversy. Its prominent headline, "Authoritative departments say forcefully that Changyu wines are safe and reliable,"⁵¹ left no doubt about the official position on this issue. At the time of writing less than half a year after the incident, Sina Weibo retained few traces of the affair despite being the site where it all started. The Weibo posting that triggered the near collapse of Changyu's stocks was nowhere to be found. It appears that the Changyu Group had achieved near total hegemony over this issue.

Changyu's total control of the story was partly owing to the difficulty for consumers and laypersons to challenge claims that were backed up by what appeared to be scientific testing results. Ordinary consumers lacked the technical expertise to contest the accuracy of those results. What consumers did challenge was the general manager's claim about drinking 123 bottles of its wine. The Changyu case differs from the Sanlu case in that the spaces for consumer voices were even more limited. Most of the postings I found were from Netease's website, with barely anything on Sina Weibo.

Netease has a signature "response to news" function (*xinwen gentie* 新闻跟帖) on its website, which allows readers to comment on its news stories. Although some other websites, including Sina, also have this function, none has promoted it as much as Netease. At a public forum in June 2007, Netease's then deputy editor-in-chief, Fang Sanwen 方三文, discussed with great pride how Netease's "response to news" functioned and why they attached great importance to it. One of the main reasons he gave was that it allowed readers to engage critically with news stories on its website. The remarks made by Changyu's general manager about drinking 123 bottles of wine were published in a news item on Netease's website on 11 August 2012. As of 23 November 2012, it had over 3,000 comments and involved the participation of 12,629 users.⁵² Many readers posted critical comments making fun of the general manager's point. For

50 Netease.com. 2012. "Zhangyu: meiri he 123 ping putaojiu cai you keneng zhiai" (Changyu claims cancer may be caused only after drinking 123 bottles of wine a day), <http://money.163.com/12/0811/12/88KL3HA600253B0H.html>. Accessed 23 November 2012.

51 <http://www.xinhuanet.com/fortune/gsb/18.htm>.

52 Internet users may participate by indicating support for a particular comment, rather than offering a comment of their own. The comment page for this news item is available at http://comment.money.163.com/money_bbs/88KL3HA600253B0H.html. Accessed 23 November 2012.

example, one person commented that the general manager's point had the logic of a robber, which basically meant that "as long as you do not die of drinking their wine, that would be ok!" (8 November 2012).⁵³ Others showed their distrust of "experts" with comments like "No need to drink 100 bottles. Just ask the experts to drink one bottle" (8 November 2012). Invoking the Sanlu milk scandal, another said, "It turns out that Changyu's testing standards are the same as China's milk powder [producers'], which is that it passes the test as long as it does not kill the drinker on the spot" (15 August 2012).

However, not all comments were critical of Changyu. Some defended Changyu with arguments similar to the Changyu Group's official claim that even though their wine products did contain pesticide residues, they met with international standards. The exchanges between Changyu's critics and supporters became quite heated, with many using foul language. Critics noted that, on the internet, people usually spoke in defence of consumer rights, arguing that those who supported Changyu instead of consumer rights must have been hired by Changyu to post favourable comments.

What matters here is not who was correct, but that these user comments show that, despite Changyu's monopoly of information in the mass media, dissenting voices appeared online which gave consumers' differing perspectives of the issue. Similar to Weibo sentiments on the Sanlu case, these internet comments convey a high degree of distrust of both corporate and government behaviour.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article reveals two diverging tendencies in contestations over food safety issues in China. One tendency is government and corporate hegemony over information about food safety. This hegemony is attained by suppressing information, framing issues and repressing dissidents. The Sanlu and Changyu cases both illustrate these hegemonic practices. Particularly notable is how corporate elites mobilize their financial resources to suppress negative information and to promote positive self-images. Government regulators are often on the side of corporate elites, or else simply absent. They are seldom subject to scrutiny.

The other tendency, counter-hegemonic practices, comprises radical protest and diffused contention. These counter-hegemonic forms are inseparable from the practices of hegemony. Zhao Lianhai and the other parents of ill children were forced to resort to radical protest because of the narrowing of channels for fighting for justice. The public sentiments on Weibo about food safety and Changyu wine were scattered expressions of dissent because the spaces for public expression were curtailed. These features suggest that while counter-hegemonic practices express dissent and disrupt mainstream consent, they remain more or

53 http://comment.money.163.com/money_bbs/88KL3HA600253B0H.html

less passive and reactive in the face of an expanding state and corporate hegemony.

Scientists and experts play an important role in environmental and health social movements worldwide.⁵⁴ In our three cases, food scientists and experts did not play any noticeable role in supporting citizens' causes. The leading critical voices on food safety on Weibo did not include food experts. In the Changyu case, they defended corporate interests. They were the main speakers at the two news conferences organized by Changyu to discredit consumer criticisms of its wine products. In the Sanlu protest, it was activist-lawyers and international media who supported Zhao Lianhai's campaign,⁵⁵ not the medical profession or other health professionals.

To the extent that public monitoring may help to improve government and corporate accountability, a more open and transparent media will be crucial in tackling today's food safety problems. A more active and independent sector of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working on food safety issues is also necessary.⁵⁶ Although NGOs are active in many other issue domains in China,⁵⁷ there are few such organizations in the area of food safety.⁵⁸ The lack of civic organizations in this area may reflect the general difficulty of running NGOs in Chinese political culture and the specific challenges in an especially contested area like food safety. A story in the popular magazine, *Nan feng chuang* 南风窗, while lamenting the persistence of food safety problems, argues that the main obstacle to the solution of food safety problems lies in the collusion between business and government agencies and in the failure of the government's regulatory departments. The story proposes tackling the problem by establishing NGOs to monitor the behaviour of government agencies and businesses, and notes that there is no such organization in Shanghai.⁵⁹ Ultimately, the same conditions that curtail public dissent on food safety issues may also hamper the building of civil society organizations in this issue area.

References

- Blanchard, Ben. 2008. "China milk scandal firm asked for cover-up help," <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/10/01/us-china-milk-idUSTRE48T0L920081001>. Accessed 26 March 2013.
- Broughton, Edward I., and Damian G. Walker. 2010. "Policies and practices for aquaculture food safety in China." *Food Policy* 35, 471–78.
- Brown, Phil. 2007. *Toxic Exposures: Contested Illnesses and the Environmental Health Movement*. New York: Columbia University Press.

54 Brown 2007.

55 Xu 2008.

56 In addressing environment-induced health problems in China, Holdaway (2010) discusses the challenges facing government policy making and regulation as well as how the media, NGOs and citizen action are important in meeting these challenges.

57 There are too many studies of civil society organizations (or NGOs) to be listed here. For two recent studies, see Shieh and Deng 2011 and Hildebrandt 2013.

58 A few exceptions are discussed in Klein 2009 and Holdaway 2010. Shi et al. 2011 examines the rise of NGOs working on community-supported agriculture.

59 Zhang, Yin Hai 2010.

- Caroll, William K., and R. S. Ratner. 1996. "Master framing and cross-movement networking in contemporary social movements." *The Sociological Quarterly* 37, 601–625.
- Cathcart, R. 1978. "Movements: confrontation as rhetorical form." *Southern Speech Journal* 43, 233–247.
- China Daily*. 2011. "Police urged to boost use of micro blog," 27 September, http://www.china.org.cn/china/2011-09/27/content_23498523.htm. Accessed 22 April 2012.
- Dai, Jing. 2010. "Renmin ribao he Niuyue shibao Sanlu naifen shijian baodao de bijiao yanjiu" (A comparative study of the coverage of the Sanlu baby formula in the *People's Daily* and *The New York Times*). *Journal of Haihe University* 12(3), 85–89.
- Ellis, L. J., and Jennifer Turner. 2008. *Sowing the Seeds: Opportunities for US–China Cooperation on Food Safety*. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.
- Fu, Hualing, and Richard Cullen. 2011. "Climbing the *weiquan* ladder: a radicalizing process for rights protection lawyers." *The China Quarterly* 205, 40–59.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1995 [1971]. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. New York: International Publishers.
- Hildebrandt, Timothy. 2013. *Social Organizations and the Authoritarian State in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hine, Christine. 2000. *Virtual Ethnography*. London: Sage.
- Holdaway, Jennifer. 2010. "Environment and health in China: an introduction to an emerging research field." *Journal of Contemporary China* 19(63), 1–22.
- Hu, Chuanji. 2008. "Wangluo gongmin de jueqi: shui du bie xiang meng wangmin" (The rise of internet citizens: don't even think about deceiving netizens), *Nanfang dushi bao*, 13 January.
- Jiang, Min. 2010. "Authoritarian informationalism: China's approach to internet sovereignty." *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 30(2), 71–89.
- Jiao, Xiangjun. 2008. "Sanlu gongguan weiji jiexi zhi'er" (Analysis of Sanlu's public relations strategy in tackling crisis, part 2), <http://www.cnad.com/html/Article/2008/0926/20080926174213947.shtml>. Accessed 12 November 2012.
- King, Gary, Jennifer Pan and Margaret E. Roberts. Forthcoming. "How censorship in China allows government criticism but silences collective expression." *American Political Science Review*.
- Klein, Jakob. 2009. "Creating ethical food consumers? Promoting organic foods in urban southwest China." *Social Anthropology* 17(1), 74–89.
- Li, Lianjiang, and Kevin J. O'Brien. 2008. "Protest leadership in rural China." *The China Quarterly* 193, 1–23.
- Long, Daxiang. 2012. "Zhangyu putaojiu nongyao canliu shijian yuqing fenxi" (Analysis of public opinion about the incident concerning pesticide residues in Changyu wines), http://yq.stcn.com/content/2012-08/16/content_6625560.html. Accessed 12 November 2012.
- Ma, Liang. 2013. "The diffusion of government microblogging: evidence from Chinese municipal police bureaus." *Public Management Review* 15(2), 288–309.
- McBeath, Jennifer Huang, and Jerry McBeath. 2010. *Environmental Change and Food Security in China*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Oster, Shai, and Loretta Chao. 2008. "China arrests 2 in milk scandal as number of sick infants rises," *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 September.
- Pan, Zhongdang. 2010. "Bounded innovations in the media." In You-tien Hsing and Ching Kwan Lee (eds.), *Reclaiming Chinese Society: The New Social Activism*. London: Routledge, 187–209.
- Pei, Xiaofang, Annuradha Tandon, Anton Alldrick, Liana Giorgi, Wei Huang and Ruijia Yang. 2011. "The China melamine milk scandal and its implications for food safety regulation." *Food Policy* 36, 412–420.
- Reporters Without Borders. 2008. "Open letter to Margaret Chan, WHO director, about the contaminated milk powder scandal," 2 October, <http://en.rsf.org/china-open-letter-to-margaret-chan-who-02-10-2008,28791.html>. Accessed 26 March 2013.

- Shi, Yan, Cunwang Cheng, Peng Lei, Tiejun Wen and Caroline Merrifield. 2011. "Safe food, green food, good food: Chinese community supported agriculture and the rising middle class." *International Journal of Agricultural Sustainability* 9(4), 551–58.
- Shieh, Shawn, and Guosheng Deng. 2011. "An emerging civil society: the impact of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake on grass-roots associations in China." *The China Journal* 65, 181–194.
- Shirk, Susan L. 2010. *Changing Media, Changing China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sullivan, Jonathan. 2012. "A tale of two microblogs." *Media, Culture & Society* 34(6), 773–783.
- Tong, Jingrong. 2012. "The importance of place." *Journalism Practice*, DOI:d10.1080/17512786.2012.698921.
- Tong, Yanqi, and Shaohua Lei. 2013. "War of position and microblogging." *Journal of Contemporary China* 22(80), 292–311.
- Wu, Guoshun, 2009. "Reflections on the flaws in Chinese media coverage of suddenly happening incidents – a case study of *Legal Daily's* coverage of the milk scandal." *The Graduate Journal of the Zhongnan University of Economics and Law* 3, 102–05.
- Xu, Zhiyong. 2008. "Yi ge jieshi baobao de fuqin – Zhao Lianhai zhe yi nian" (Father of a child with kidney stones – a year in Zhao Lianhai's life), <http://www.my1510.cn/article.php?id=64476dc401b8ac7c>. Accessed 1 February 2011.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 2012. "Food safety and social risk in contemporary China." *Journal of Asian Studies* 71(3), 705–729.
- Yang, Guobin. 2012. "Social dynamics in the evolution of China's internet content control regime." In Monroe Price and Stefaan Verhulst (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Media Law*. London: Routledge.
- Yang, Guobin. 2013. "Power and transgression in the global media era: the strange case of Twitter in China." In Marwan Kraidy (ed.), *Communication and Power in the Global Era*. London: Routledge.
- Yu, Haiqing. 2011. "Beyond gatekeeping: J-blogging in China." *Journalism* 12(4), 379–393.
- Yuan, Elaine J., and Thomas B. Ksiazek. 2011. "The duality of structure in China's national television market: a network analysis of audience behavior." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 55(2), 180–197.
- Zhang, Xiaoling. 2011. *The Transformation of Political Communication in China: From Propaganda to Hegemony*. New Jersey: World Scientific.
- Zhang, Yin Hai. 2010. "Mainland has no rights defense organizations on food safety issues, scholars call for social forces to participate in monitoring." *Nan Feng Chuang*, 6 May.
- Zhao, Lianhai. 2010. "Wuzui bianhu (chenshu) ci" (Statement pleading not guilty), March, <http://www.bullogger.com/blogs/Yangjiapu/archives/355730.aspx>. Accessed 31 March 2013.
- Zhao, Yuezhi. 2008. *Communication in China: Political Economy, Power, and Conflict*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.