Linguistic violence and online political communications in China: The example of 鸡的屁 (Ji De Pi) as an ironic spoof of gross domestic product in online debates around environmental issues

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Abstract
This article discusses the function of linguistic violence in online political communication in China, by using the specific example of 鸡的屁 (pronounced “ji de pi”), an ironic metaphor for gross domestic product. By using systemic functional linguistics as its methodology, the article demonstrates that the term is linguistically violent, and reveals that such a term is used to represent gross domestic product but also means “the fart of a chicken.” It is used in online discussions to show disagreement with and disdain toward the government’s gross domestic product-centric policies. The article argues the use of 鸡的屁 demonstrates Chinese Internet users’ creativities in online discourses, and their use of language to resist government policies that fail to serve their interests. It is not only a way to express oppositional opinions but also the public’s strong emotion of anger.

Keywords
China, environmental debates, gross domestic product, linguistic violence, online political communication

Introduction
Statistics from the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) show that by the end of 2016, 53.2% of the Chinese population used the Internet (CNNIC, 2017). With half of
the population now being online, the Internet is used as a space where individuals are not only entertained but also engage in online political communication. By suggesting “online political communication in China,” this article refers to the phenomenon that individuals are debating about politics, communicating with others about their political opinions, and challenging and criticizing the Chinese government by using the Internet as the primary platform, in China. Academic studies have been exploring the online political communications in China by investigating how members of the Chinese public use the Internet to communicate their needs, fight for their rights, and how the Chinese government controls and engages with the public through the Internet (Lewis, 2013; Mou, Atkin, & Fu, 2011; Zhang & Lin, 2014; Zheng, 2008; Zheng & Wu, 2005). Such studies are important because they not only contribute to our understanding of new media formats, namely, whether the new media can empower the public to communicate with the government or not, but also to our understanding of the changing dynamic of political communications in China, namely, the “what” and “how” of debate between net-users and the government; thus, more and more academic studies have been drawn on this area (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013; Li, 2010; Meng, 2010; Tai, 2014; Yang, 2003). In recent years, it has been suggested by scholars like Yang (2009, p. 1) that to understand the real struggle of the online political communication in China, it is necessary to see its contentious character, as results of “interaction of multiple forces” (see also Jiang, 2016; Lei, 2017). This is an important approach for the academic debate, because it allows views and focus of Chinese online political communication to broaden and to encounter the changing dynamic of online activities.

This article shares with Yang, Jiang and Lei’s observation of the contentious character of online political communication in China, and agrees that such an approach is crucial in current debate. It contributes to the approach with a specific focus, in that it investigates the use of linguistic violence in online political communications in terms of how it is used and what it means for political debate. The definition of linguistic violence in this context is taken from and expanded from the traditional definition: it sees linguistic violence as use of vulgar, humiliating, and discriminating words, phrases, and sentences to harm, attack, and label others, victims of which can be vulnerable groups in the society. Examples of linguistic violence can be verbal violence against women in domestic spaces, and racial discriminations (Jackman, 2002). When it is used in online communication in China, the target of attack through linguistic violence is not only individuals, but also the government. It is this violence toward the government by linguistic means that is particularly discussed in this article. This article analyzes the context, application, and meaning of linguistic violence, argues that linguistic violence is a part of the contentious character of China’s online political communication, and the analysis of it here contributes to academic debates around China’s online political communication.

Academic interest in language usage in online political communications in China is growing (Meng, 2011; Sullivan, 2012; Wallis, 2015; Xu, 2012), reflecting the status of online discourses as an indication of the complexities, dynamics, and creativities of online political communication in China. Such study particularly offers insights into the contentious character of online political communications in China. This research contributes to emerging research of the linguistic aspect, arguing that linguistic violence has been widely applied in online political communications, primarily in the format of attacking other users and the government through direct swearing and use of vulgar, humiliating, but also humorous terms. A well-explored example of this kind is “Grass Mud Horse” (cao ni ma, pronunciation is similar to fuck your mother), a vulgar and gendered term that humiliates women (Wallis, 2015); however, it is also ironic and rhetorical, first used by Chinese net-users to attack the Chinese government’s censorship of online language, and communicate
their concerns over freedom of expression (Meng, 2011; Sullivan, 2012). This article expands on their studies by identifying a similar example of this kind: 鸡的屁 (ji de pi), a term that implies gross domestic product (GDP), widely used by Chinese net-users who wish to criticize Chinese government’s GDP-centric policies and the environmental damage they cause. The term 鸡的屁 is illustrated by this article, first because it involves similar usage as Grass Mud Horse, while showing different perspectives of linguistic violence in China’s online political communication. 鸡的屁 is similar to Grass Mud Horse, in terms of introducing a vulgar term to communicate contents they hold against the government, and using a humorous way to communicate such concern. It is also different from Grass Mud Horse, in that the contention it communicates is not over freedom of expression, but rather around the Chinese government’s GDP-driven behaviors and polices and the damage they cause to the environment, one of the most debated concerns in China’s online political communication. This article finds that in environmental debates, 鸡的屁 appears and is spread spontaneously in the network, and functions as a mechanism that enables Chinese net-users to communicate about their concerns over GDP-driven policies and express their needs for a better environment over GDP. This vulgar, humorous but also critical term becomes a visible symbol to identify public opinions and concerns in the environmental debate.

To expand on the above argument, this article will first define the contentious character of political communication in China, followed by discussing how online language and discourse in China have been studied. It will then select an exemplary case, analyzing how 鸡的屁 is used, its function in this event, and what it tells us about online political communication in China.

The contentious character of online political communication in China

Online political communication in China illustrates a contentious character, which is given increasing attention in academic studies. While linguistic violence is a part of such a character, it is not yet fully studied. To understand how online linguistic violence contributes to online political communication, it is necessary to first understand the contentious character as the fundamental context.

Yang (2009) argues that China’s online political communication shows a contentious character as a “result of interaction of multiple forces” (p. 1). Key examples of these “forces” are the Chinese government, companies, organization, and Chinese net-users. Online political communications often involve expressing and exchanging contentious and even conflicting political opinions and concerns among different forces on online platforms. Expressing and exchanging contentious opinions can occur between different net-users with different political opinions, such as between feminist groups and mainstream patriarchy thoughts, or between the elites and ordinary people (Jiang, 2016); it can occur between net-users and business organizations when net-users feel their interests are harmed by the organization; and the most intensified contention and one that can be regarded as a central theme in online political communication in China is between the Chinese government and Chinese net-users (Rosen, 2010).

In academic studies of government–public contention in online political communication, the contention between freedom of expression and government censorship is a crucial focus (Ho, 2001; Li, 2010; Zhang, 2011). This type of contention gains attention because controlling online public debates and discourses that threaten the core interests of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government, namely, the legitimacy of the CCP regime, and the one-party system in the country, has been the major attitude of the Chinese government. Such an attitude leads Chinese authority to establish and apply multiple levels of regulations, policies, and censorship to control
online political communication, to inform the Chinese public that, when they are debating political issues or reacting to Chinese government, their discussions, opinions, and language are monitored by the government, and their opinions and language can be censored if the monitoring body regards them as sensitive or challenging to the political agenda of the CCP (China Business Review, 2016; Goldsmith & Wu, 2008; Harwit & Clark, 2001; Ji, 2014; Kalathil & Boas, 2003; Lee & Liu, 2016; Qiu, 2004; Wang & Hong, 2010; Zheng, 2008). These regulations and censorship have limited the level of freedom of expression in China. But despite the government control, online political communication in China is still growing, and within this growing communication, many Chinese net-users have been criticizing the control of freedom of expression in China, the political system that sets the control, and some of them are calling for democratization of the system to free the control. This struggle between the Chinese government and the net-users over what can be said and what cannot be said, is regarded as one of the most intense contentions in China, and is thus well studied.

But with changing times, the traditional focus on the government–public contention over freedom of expression no longer reflects the dynamic of online political communication in China. When Yang (2009) argues that the contentious character in China is caused by multiple forces, he also argues that the contentions between the Chinese government and Chinese net-users are multiple. Besides criticizing the system of control, increasingly, the Chinese public is establishing and engaging in online political communication around certain government policies or decisions that fail to serve their needs, or harm their interests. The purpose of such communication does not fall into the control verse resistance category, but can be seen as seeking for engagement and problem-solving between the government and the public: the public concern is less about freedom of expression in this type of communication, instead, it is of fighting against the CCP regime. They want to gain the government’s attention over certain issues, want their needs to be better understood and served by the CCP regime, and want their concerns to be solved internally by this regime.

An example of contentious debates around a policy that seeks problem-solving with the government is the environmental debate in China’s online political communication. A number of scholars (Huang & Yip, 2012; Stalley & Yang, 2006; Wong, 2003; Yang, 2009; Yang & Calhoun, 2007) find that environmental issues, for example, pollution and overconsumption of natural resources, are among the most debated and communicated issues in China’s online debates. This topic becomes major on one hand because environment is already central in China, as the Chinese government has understood the importance of environmental protection, while the Chinese public shares this understanding and also wants a clean environment. Based on this shared understanding, environment issues are strong concerns in Chinese society, and debates around environment issues are of interest to both the public and the government. But on the other hand, although environmental protection is widely spoken about in official discourses, yet the application of environmental protection actions is not sufficient, and many of the government’s economic and industrial development policies are conflictual to the public understanding of environmental protection. At a time when the Chinese public identifies policies that are environmentally unfriendly, damage their living conditions, and fail to meet their needs for a cleaner environment, they often use the Internet as a major platform to express their concerns and angers toward the policy. The purpose of their expressions is not to challenge the CCP regime, but to show the government that they are unhappy about certain policies, and wish the government can pay attention to problematic policies, and change them to better serve the public’s needs for a better environment. Such issues are political because they often involve strong criticism of the Chinese government’s environment-related
policies and actions and, more importantly, they are close to the public’s daily lives and immediate worries; they are also contentious and contention is caused by polices, rather than the system. But the fact that they do not aim at changing the political regime in China does not reduce their political significance, and showing the contentious characters and dynamic of Chinese online political communication.

**Linguistic violence in China’s online political communication**

Contention in China’s online political communication not only shows through the topics that the Chinese public engages in, but also shows through the language they use in online debates. And the key linguistic element in online political communication that reflects the contentious character is linguistic violence. Such violence refers to behavior that uses language as a weapon to attack, humiliate, or harm others in online communication. The most common way to commit linguistic violence is by swearing at other net-users where conflict occurs, or by swearing at the government when unhappy about government behaviors. By these means, other net-users and the government are attacked through words, phrases, or sentences and emotions of disapproval, hatred, and contention are broadcast. While academics in linguistic and rhetoric studies have well explored the meanings and impact of linguistic violence on vulnerable groups, or in political speeches (Andersson & Trudgill, 1990; Jackman, 2002), its functions in China’s online political communication have received less attention. Scholars like Yang (2003, p. 473) argue that “online discourse can be very uncivil,” while Li (2010) believes that such communications have the “tendency to sensationalism nurtured by plebeian curiosity and parochial imagination” (p. 73). It is clear that these two scholars see online linguistic violence as problematic, stating that by using linguistic violence, online discourse becomes “uncivil” and when online debates involve linguistic violence, they display “sensationalism,” “plebeians,” and “parochial imaginations.” Their perception reinforces the negative effects that linguistic violence could cause, but ignores the fact that the target of attack in China’s online political communication is not only individuals, but also the government. By using emotion-oriented, vulgar, and humiliating terms, violence is not only committed as personal attacks, or gender/racial discrimination, but also has political meanings. This article particularly explores their political meaning and understands language as a medium through which messages are delivered through specific words, phrases, and sentences, to express what Chinese net-users do not like, do not agree with, or do not need. Public and contentious opinions are not only expressed through the contents of the debates, but also through net-users’ choice and creation of language. Linguistic violence is an indispensable part that contributes to the dynamic of China’s online political communication.

In current studies of online political communication in China, focus on online discourses in terms of the language used when expressing contentious opinions and their political effects are gaining increasing attention, as more and more scholars have realized the importance of online discourse. On the importance of studying the language of debate, Xu (2012) suggests: “[T]oday, public netizen discourse has become a source for effecting change, personally, socially, and legislatively” (p. 15). This means online discourse not only forms opinions and arguments that net-users generate around certain topics and events, but that the discourse itself, and the language that constructs the discourse, also contains political messages, and thus is equally important as a topic for study. Xu (2012) identifies typical examples of online discourse in China, such as “pantomime, parody, and satire,” which “aim at undermining the efficacy of authoritative discourse” (p. 18).
There is also “newspeak,” by use of which Chinese net-users ridicule the “official discourse by the government” that is “quite clichéd, procedural, and seriously divorced from reality” and then “abuse” it with “contempt and derision” (Xu, 2012, p. 19). By using these discourses, language becomes the medium through which Chinese net-users’ creativities and contentions can be displayed, as they organize or reorganize language to create new meanings for discourses that are different from, or even opposite to, the official ones used by the government. In this way, official communications from the authorities are targeted and undermined and abused by online discourses. Xu’s studies demonstrate that when Chinese net-users disagree with official discourses or see them as problematic, they express their disagreement not only through discussing the events or behaviors associated with them, but also by playing with the discourses themselves. It is therefore important to study the language and discourses closely, as they offer new perspectives for understanding online political communications in China.

A more specific analysis is conducted by Meng (2011), to explore Grass Mud Horse, reflecting that vulgar words can also be political meaningful in the debate. She identifies this term to be widely used by Chinese net-users in debates, and finds that this word represents a type of animal but is pronounced as “cao ni ma,” which is very similar to the Chinese pronunciation of “操你妈 (“fuck your mother”). Grass Mud Horse performs violence through linguistic means, because although it can refer to a kind of animal, it can also be humiliating, attacking, and harming others, who are targeted by this term; a woman’s body is used to form this term. Meng’s (2011) approach to this term is not to deny its value by regarding it as uncivil or plebeian, but rather she studies the causes of its use and the political meanings behind it. She finds that the appearance of Grass Mud Horse was under circumstances of tightened government control of online political communications, when a campaign against “low and vulgar practices on the Internet” was announced in 2009 (p. 44). This campaign located humiliating words like “操你妈 (“fuck your mother”) and removed them from online spaces because they were regarded as vulgar, and as polluting the online environment. To resist such censorship, the word Grass Mud Horse was introduced to replace “操你妈, with the intention of ridiculing the government’s intention of “cleaning” the online environment by stopping individuals from freely choosing their own language. By using the written word for Grass Mud Horse, it becomes harder for the state monitoring body to detect it and treat it as a vulgar term, since it can have alternative meanings, one “innocent,” the other abusive. The meaning of the word is entirely related to the context of the expressions and debates around it, which the monitoring mechanisms used may not be able to accurately identify. Meng’s study shows that it is both possible and necessary to study it in terms of its political meanings and effects, with similar examples found in Sullivan (2012). From Meng and Sullivan’s study, it can be argued that the spontaneous creation and application of Grass Mud Horse in China in fact reflects the central theme in China’s online political communication: the contention between Chinese net-users and the government over freedom of information. In this case, this particular vulgar word is used by Chinese net-users as a linguistic weapon to react to and ridicule government censorship that prevents them from expressing freely. By understanding the political context and meaning of Grass Mud Horse, it is possible to identify the strong contention in political communication.

Contentions surrounding Grass Mud Horse also involve gender discrimination. Wallis (2015) argues that in the spread of Grass Mud Horse “women’s body parts are amplified in the public sphere to critique a defective government” (p. 229), which “reveals the ‘limits of gender’ through a gendered dual (in)visibility” (p. 230). This means when Grass Mud Horse is used to ridicule government censorship, at the same time, women’s role (in this case is mother) is also humiliated.
But feminist critiques of the term have been less examined, and the contention between government and the public over freedom of expressions becomes primary, while women’s interests become secondary. But despite being fewer in number, Wallis’ study shows that if academic debates only take one type of contention as serious while ignoring other contentions showing through language, the understanding of China’s online political communication cannot be sufficient. To further expand the debate, this article introduces and analyzes the term “鸡的屁,” which illustrates the contention between the government and public over environmental issues; the types of contention does not concern freedom of expression, but rather public immediate worries of environmental damage.

鸡的屁 and online political communications around environmental issues in China

In her study of the use of Grass Mud Horse, Meng (2011) argues that the appearance of the term occurred “spontaneously; nobody knows who coined the term first” but, once it appeared, it was quickly adopted and spread by other net-users (p. 43). Such a spontaneous development for Meng (2011) best reflects the “decentralized yet effective communication that challenges the hegemonic order” in China’s online political communication; which means the appearance and spread of Grass Mud Horse was not ordered by any hegemonic powers, but rather are used and communicated spontaneously by individual net-users within the network (p. 43). The same situation applies to the term 鸡的屁. It is not possible to trace the first appearance of the term, which spread spontaneously and was decentralized within the network: people identify this term in their daily communication around environmental issues, find the term to be interesting and humorous, it enables them to express their concerns and angers, and thus they start to use the term. As a result, the term has become popular in China’s online platform. The term 鸡的屁 in writing refers to “the fart of a chicken,” while in pronunciation it is equivalent to the English pronunciation “ji de pi” or “GDP” (gross domestic product), the “main measure” of “economic growth based on the value of goods and services produced during a given period” for a country (National Statistics of the UK, 2016). Therefore, when 鸡的屁 is used, it may refer to the fart of a chicken but can also refer to the growth of GDP. The context of the text in which it is used determines the meaning. When the word refers to GDP, the pronunciation of “ji de pi” is implied, but its meaning has been redefined to present GDP as the fart of a chicken.

The wider context that contributes to the creation of the term 鸡的屁 is that, for a long time, economic growth in China has been central to the government’s domestic development policies. While GDP, as the most direct and visible measurement of economic growth, has been regarded as the only meaningful aim of government policies, placing GDP at the center of government policy has been at the expense of the environment, since it leads to the overconsumption of natural resources and to pollution (Chen, 2010; Edmonds, 1999; Wong & Chan, 1996). As demonstrated in Ho’s (2001) study, in the years since economic reform in China, the country’s economy has achieved rapid growth but has also created “rapidly increasing air, water, and noise pollutions” (p. 899). Chinese citizens, he argues, have taken to stating their “environmental complaints,” because “environmental problems affect their lives directly.” Nearly two decades since Ho’s observations, the situation has changed to a degree, in ways that government has introduced many regulations and installed various mechanisms to protect the environment, and GDP growth is no longer the only aim for government policy; but what has remained unchanged is that Chinese economic
development still has priority over environmental protection, and seeking for GDP growth is still a powerful drive for the government’s actions, especially for the local government, thus the environment is still being damaged.

For the Chinese public, more and more people’s daily lives have been or will potentially be affected by worsening environmental problems, so the public’s desire for a better environment is growing. Public attention to the environment has been seen in various issues, concerning government, organizational, and individual behaviors that may affect the environment. When concerning governmental behaviors that may affect the environment, the contention between economic development policies seeking for GDP growth and the possible environmental damage caused by policies has become most intensified: the public has received contradicting political messages from the Chinese government. Despite reinforcements on environmental protection in official discourses, seeking for GDP growth is still placed prior, with a huge cost to the environment. This has continued to constitute a major aspect of China’s political communications. This major aspect means that environment remains one of the areas of public discussion that attracts most attention, and around which people wish to express their opinions. Moreover, since Ho’s 2001 study, the spread of the Internet has meant that debates of this type have moved online and become both more visible and more frequent (Sima, 2011; Stalley & Yang, 2006; Yang & Calhoun, 2007). By using the Internet as the platform for debate, formerly occasional and private environmental discussions have become daily and public. The public are constantly being fed information about new environmental problems in China and are being exposed to the opinions of others about these problems, and access to the Internet means that they are now able to engage simultaneously in discussions around these issues. Online political communication around environmental issues also illustrates contentious characters, not only because Chinese net-users have been directly criticizing some of the government’s policies and decisions that they regard as harming the environment, but also because they have critically created new words and phrases as part of online discourses to express angers and disapprovals. The emergence of the term 鸡的屁 is under this context, and is an important example of the critical online discourse in the political communication of environmental issues.

The emergence of the term 鸡的屁 in online discussion around environment issues has occurred in this context. The term 鸡的屁 is an important example because the key contentions between the Chinese government and Chinese public over environmental issues has been clearly reflected through this single word, which is created by and spontaneously spread by Chinese net-users as a mechanism to challenge and to express. 鸡的屁 is similar to previously explored examples such as Grass Mud Horse, in terms of the vulgar, humiliating, and humorous nature of the word. By using this term, Chinese net-users associate GDP with the fart of a chicken to undermine, ridicule, and intimate that it is as meaningless as a fart. The “fart” part in the term is particularly vulgar and humiliating, labeling GDP as inhuman, filthy, stinking, and insignificant. It is also a humorous way to make fun of a term like GDP that is regarded as important and formal by the government, and by using this humorous but also humiliating term, the aim of the public is to attack the government’s GDP-centric policy by linguistic means.

However, the term 鸡的屁 is also different from Grass Mud Horse, since it communicates different types of contentions in China’s online political communication. Using 鸡的屁 to replace GDP does not aim at avoiding censorship, because GDP is not normally seen as a sensitive term that can be censored in online debates, and does not require an equivalent term. Instead, its appearance and spread is contributed by the contention between GDP-centric polices which conflict with the public’s desire for a cleaner environment, and its application is primarily for the purpose of
criticizing the government’s GDP-centric thoughts. In this way, a concept that the government has defined as crucial to its policy (GDP) has been problematized and redefined through a humiliating label. Such a label and its application can be characterized as linguistically violent in nature, because by calling GDP a chicken’s fart has a strong intention to humiliate and attack is indicated.

To further argue how the term 鸡的屁 has enabled Chinese net-users to communicate their concerns over environmental issues, and to challenge the government, this article will analyze the usage of this term in an online political communication around environmental issues. The case illustrated is a debate around the building of an oil-refinery industrial plant in the city of Kunming, Yunnan province, the products of which include paraxylene. The central contention appearing in this debate is that the Kunming local people found the government’s decision to build an oil-refining plant as economically beneficial but environmentally damaging. The Internet, more specifically, the Sina microblog, the most visited interactive site in China (Alexa, 2016), has been used as the major platform for Chinese net-users to engage into communications around this event. In the debates, the term 鸡的屁 emerged spontaneously and was used by some net-users to communicate their concerns over the plant and express their angers over the government’s GDP-driven decision to launch the plant in Kunming. This event is used as an example, first because the event clearly presents the contention between the public and the Chinese government over environmental issues, the contention that is communicated through use of 鸡的屁. Also, the event was huge at the time, and was significant in China’s environmental debates, not only because it was engaged in by a great number of contributors, but also because it grew to such an extent that the Chinese government had to admit the importance of the issue. The China Environment Report, which is the official newspaper owned by China’s Ministry of Environmental Protection, named the Kunming case as one of the ten landmark events of 2013.

To understand how the term 鸡的屁 enabled the Kunming public to communicate their concerns and contentious opinions with the government, it is necessary to understand the context of the event. In 2013, the local people in Kunming were informed that an oil refinery plant was about to be built in the local area, following a decision made by the central and local governments. The Chinese government used party newspapers to inform the public that it saw the plant as a part of its national resource strategy aimed at addressing the country’s resource shortage and transportation problems. The plant contained pipelines that would bring oil and gas from Burma to Kunming to be refined locally to supply petrol to meet the demand in Southwest China. The local government regarded the plant as economically beneficial for Kunming’s local GDP growth, since it would produce not only petrol, but also byproducts such as paraxylene (Kunming Daily, 2010; Li, 2012, 2013; Shen, 2013). But, at the same time the public was informed by an article entitled “Why Does Kunming Move in Reverse?” published by two non-party media through their Sina microblog accounts, which suggested that the plant would be potentially environmentally unfriendly. It was stated that the industrial discharge from the oil-refining process and the toxicity of the paraxylene production process would damage local waterways and air quality, and that the plant would affect the local environment and people’s health. This reported potential environmental damage caused huge public concern about the plant.

The published article became the starting point for a major online political communication around the plant, and by using the comments/retweet sections in the Sina microblog, opinions were expressed as microblog posts. These two microblogs were not only posts in Sina that talked about the plant, but they were among the most significant ones. This is because when Chinese public was
Informed by the environmental damage of the plant in March and April 2013, many posts were published in Sina, but a great number of them were immediately or eventually removed from the platform, while these two blog posts become the few surviving ones, which recorded down public opinions around the plants. These two posts have been accessible to the for 4 years, until they disappeared in July 2017, which gave time for this author to study the comments/retweets of the microblog posts as valuable sources to discuss use of 鸡的屁 in debates of this kind.

In the posts, comments, and retweets in the two accounts, the term 鸡的屁 appeared 49 times. The appearance of 鸡的屁 was spontaneous in the debate, it was not that someone ordered or promoted this term to be used, but rather it was self-determined by some net-users, as a way to express their concerns over the oil-refining plant. In these 49 appearances, the term was mostly associated with government behaviors (31 times) and then denied by Chinese net-users. This means when 鸡的屁 was used, it was often used as something that the government wanted, but the net-users did not want. The example of this type of use is best revealed through the first comment when 鸡的屁 appeared. The post is as follows:

Totally against, we do not need 鸡的屁, we need healthy environment, those people who are in powers, (fuck) your mother, you ruined and harmed the next generation of our Yunnan people, for your own careers.

To better understand the meaning and function of this term in the debate, research analyzes the discourses and the power relations shown through discourses. It applies systemic functional linguistics (SFL) as the method, which as Young and Fitzgerald (2006) indicates is “a way of understanding the functions that language performs and the choices people make when they … exchange meanings …” (p. 16). Young and Fitzgerald (2006) suggest that SFL can offer an objective description of discourses, by identifying the “actors, goals, processes, and circumstances” in a discourse, so that “who and what is involved in different … actions and different states” (p. 16). The “actors” are those participants who are “doing action” in the discourse, and the “goals” are those who are “being acted on.” The actions taking place between actors and goals are referred to as “processes,” and the term “circumstances” describes the “when, where, and how of process” (Young and Fitzgerald, 2006, p. 16). In this process, SFL enables analysts to understand how different words, phrases, and their arrangement function in the sentence, and the relations between those words help to demonstrate the power relations and meanings of the speaker/writer structured into the discourses. This method is applied to analyze 鸡的屁, because it enables this research to identify what function this term can perform in the sentence, and then by associating the wider context of the political communication around Kunming’s event, and around the environmental debates in China, it is possible to discuss how linguistic violence enables public and contentious opinions to be expressed in this communication.

Table 1. SFL analysis of the retweet in Sina microblog containing the term 鸡的屁.

| Actors       | we, we, those people who, you |
|--------------|-------------------------------|
| Processes    | totally against, do not need, need, are in, fuck, ruined, harmed |
| Goals        | 鸡的屁, healthy environment, power, your mother, the next generation of our Yunnan people, for your own careers |
| Circumstances| N/A                           |

SFL: systemic functional linguistics.
Table 1 shows that in this text there are two camps of actors, one being “we” and the other being “those people” and “you.” The actions and relations (processes and goals) associated with “we” are “do not need 鸡的屁” and “need” for a “healthy environment.” The actions and relations constructed for “you” are “in power” and “ruined” and “harmed” the “Yunnan people,” for their “own careers.” By establishing these two camps and ascribing to each a position and behaviors, this text clearly shows that “we” and “Yunnan people” are opposite to “those people” who are “in power.” What “we” need and what “those people” need are totally different. Of the two camps, “those people” are constructed with more power than “we,” because “our Yunnan people” is the goal of “those people’s” actions of “ruin” and “harm,” which suggest “we” are the victims of “those people,” while “we” has not been constructed with the power to have “those people” as their goals. In other words, “those people” can have power over us, but “we” are not given such powers. Instead, the power “we” have is to rebel against ‘those people’s’ behaviors by expressing what “we” think about their behaviors, particularly by stressing that “we” ‘need’ a “healthy environment,” but “do not need 鸡的屁.” In this text, the term “鸡的屁” appears as a goal for the actor “we” through a process of “do not need,” which clearly shows that “鸡的屁” does not belong to the “we” camp. This puts ‘鸡的屁’ on the same side as “those people,” because both are what “we” have argued against through this text.

Associating 鸡的屁 with the government and then denying them all is one way this term was used; while for the rest 18 times, the term was used on its own, namely, the whole sentence only contains this single word, and it was made as a statement without other information or context in the sentence. In this type of usage, the original meaning of 鸡的屁 is amplified as a metaphor to ridicule the GDP, and by stating this single word, the net-user’s intention to attack the GDP and to express their disapproval emotion toward GDP-driven policies was made clear. This shows the power of online linguistic violence in this type: even without adding further information and associating this term with the government, it is still possible for net-users to express their opinion, and their concerns in the communication.

Altogether, regardless of whether associating 鸡的屁 with the government, then denying them, or stating the term as its own, it was clear that the opinions this term helps to express in the political communication around the building the Kunming oil refinery was that the government in power is being driven by GDP and is thus ruining the environment and harming the interests and needs of the people of Yunnan and the next generation. What Yunnan people need is a healthy environment, not the GDP that is created by industrial development. In this debate, opinions that are expressed through the use of this term challenged the government, showing contentious opinions, defining government’s decision as having a negative impact on the public and clearly opposing the government’s decision regarding the oil refinery. The function of 鸡的屁 is not only to express the opinion that the Kunming locals “do not need” the plant, but also to create a sense of disdain toward it. In addition, the use of this linguistically humiliating term raises the level of skepticism toward GDP-driven actions, thereby enhancing individual problematization and the expression of self-determined needs and concerns.

It should also be noticed that, although the term 鸡的屁 has been repeatedly used in the debate, the target of attack by using the term is only the government’s GDP-driven policies, the government officials who are driven by the GDP, and not the government itself. In the exemplary text, it was blamed that “people in power” ruined the environment for their “career,” showing that the speaker blamed the people in power, not the political system. This is also the central theme of the entire political communication around the oil-refining plant: what the public hoped was
the government could understand their concern, help them to solve the problem by changing their
decision to stop building this plant; and by putting the environment, not the GDP at the center of
their policy. This has reflected the contentious character of online political communication in
China: expressing of contentious opinions is not only for the purpose of resistance against control,
but also to engage the government into debate to solve problems.

Discussions and conclusion
This article studies the political meanings and effects of linguistic violence in China’s online politi-
cal communications. By using the term 鸡的屁 as an example, this article finds that linguistic
violence is not only used online to attack the government’s intention to censor online discourses,
as suggested by academic discussions of the term Grass Mud Horse. Such linguistic tactics can also
appear in the format of ironic spoofs used by net-users to express and reinforce their disagreements
with government decisions and actions. The term 鸡的屁 in particular has been associated with
online environmental debates in China, this being one of the most debated and crucial topics in the
country’s online political communications. By using the term, Chinese net-users attack the Chinese
government’s GDP-centric approach, an approach that sees environmental protection as less
important than economic development. By analyzing this term, it is possible to identify the strong
emotions of disapproval and disdain about the government’s GDP-based policies which are felt by
users of the term, which is the central contention of political communication, and use of 鸡的屁
enables and reinforces this theme.

What has not been discussed in this article due to the limitation of space is how the government
reacts to 鸡的屁, used when communicating about environmental concerns. In the political com-
unication around Kunming oil refinery, it was only clear that the use of 鸡的屁, and the overall
debate that expressed concerns over the plant did not achieve their hoped result: the plant was put
into construction and production without sufficient environmental protection measurements (South
Urban Post, 2015). Although there is no evidence to show that by using the term 鸡的屁, Chinese
net-users have been able to influence the government to make real changes at the policy level, the
research does present a vivid illustration of the public’s opinions and provides evidence of ways in
which net-users react to the Chinese government’s political messages. This article thus concludes
that online linguistic violence is politically meaningful and can create effects within China’s online
political communications. It is a mechanism that Chinese net-users employ to express their politi-
cal concerns, to display their emotions, and to indicate their interests and needs. Such expressions
involve swearing, attacking, and humiliating, but in an environment where political debates can be
censored and controlled, these expressions are powerful demonstrations of the existence of politi-
cal communications in China’s online environment.

As for the government’s attitude toward 鸡的屁 as a whole, official discourses need to be exam-
ined, and can be a focus for further studies.

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Note
1. The two non-party media that reported the environmental damage of the oil refining plant are “China
   Capital Reports Net (CCRN),” an account belonging to a non-party news website established by Beijing
Chuang Ye Zhi Cheng Management and Consultation Limited Liability Company and “21st Century Economy,” belonging to a non-party newspaper owned by Gunagzhou 21st Media Ltd.

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