he suppression of the prodemocracy movement in 1989 did not quell the spirit of contention. After a short hiatus, new waves of popular protests started to surge across China, beginning roughly in 1992. There were 8,700 “mass incidents” in 1993, according to China’s Ministry of Public Security. This number rose to 32,000 in 1999, 58,000 in 2003, and 87,000 in 2005.1 Accompanying the alarming ascendance of social conflicts in recent years is the appearance of an official rhetoric of building a “harmonious society.” Perhaps more than anything else, this new discourse indicates that Chinese society has entered an age of contention.

As popular contention increases in frequency, its forms have diversified. In the 1980s, protests centered on struggles for the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and democracy. This was true of the Democracy Wall movement in 1978 and 1979, the campus elections in 1980, and the student demonstrations in 1986 and 1989.2 These struggles have continued to the present day.3 Yet many new forms of contention have appeared, ranging from labor protests and villagers’ protests to environmental activism, consumer activism, women’s activism, HIV/AIDS activism, religious activism, activism of ethnic minorities, popular nationalism, and rights-protection activism (weiquan yundong).4 Online activism is one of these new types.

The appearance of new contentious forms since the 1990s represents a rupture with popular struggles in the previous decade. With the crushing of the 1989 student movement, the energies of popular struggles born out of the Cultural Revolution5 were drained. The century-long aspirations of a Chinese enlightenment project dating back to the May Fourth movement were exhausted. The student movement marked both the height of China’s
enlightenment project and the beginning of its transformation. As Joseph Fewsmith puts it:

Never in the seven decades since then had intellectuals themselves come to see the May Fourth tradition as outdated or irrelevant to their concerns. That changed in the 1990s, and the turn away from the enlightenment project of the May Fourth movement marks a major, one is tempted to say fundamental, change in the way many intellectuals view China and its place in the world.\(^6\)

The rise of online activism and other contentious forms and issues marks a new stage of popular contention in postenlightenment Chinese modernity. Much of this book will be devoted to illuminating these new forms of activism. This chapter analyzes the broader structural conditions underlying the emergence of the new citizen activism in China, using online activism as a strategic entry point. I argue that if popular contention has undergone a structural transformation, it is because Chinese society itself has experienced such a transformation. Online activism and popular contention in general are responses to the consequences of Chinese modernity.

**Popular Contention Since the 1990s**

To say that 1989 marked a historical rupture is not to ignore continuities. The wave of popular protests that ushered in the reform era has not subsided. The struggles for political freedom and reform have never stopped. The frequency of worker strikes and rural protests in recent years is well known. There were protests among workers and villagers in the 1980s as well,\(^7\) but they were little known and overshadowed by student activism. Such labor and rural protests have continued to the present day.

Yet there is change in continuity. Popular contention since the 1990s has new features significant enough to merit its name—China’s new citizen activism. The first feature of this new activism is the sheer frequency of contention, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. The second feature is the proliferation of contentious issues. On the one hand, material grievances such as wages and living conditions continue to be central concerns in labor protests. Villagers have protested against tax burdens, corruption, and the diversion of public funds.\(^8\) On the other hand, many new issues have become salient. These range from protests about land loss to pension, property rights, consumer rights, popular nationalism, animal rights, pollution,
migrant labor, HIV/AIDS, and discrimination against hepatitis-B carriers. Clearly, China's new citizen activism includes some of the issues at the center of the European "new social movements."

The third feature is the change in the social basis of contention. At various points in modern Chinese history, workers, peasants, and students were the dominant forces of popular contention. This remained true throughout the 1980s. Since the mid-1990s, however, the social basis of contention has broadened. Workers, peasants, and students are still restive. Yet other social groups have entered the scene. Homeowners, pensioners, migrants, hepatitis-B carriers, ant farmers, consumers, even computer gamers and pet owners—all have joined in. Particularly important are the rise of an urban middle class and the coming of age of the generation born after the beginning of the economic reform. The urban middle class is a heterogeneous category. Those elements with close ties to the political elite, such as the private entrepreneurs or "red capitalists" studied by Margaret Pearson and Bruce Dickson, may not be inclined toward political change. Other elements, however, may act differently. For example, urban homeowners, despite their moderate forms of action, are among the most contentious in China today. The new reform generation is among the most wired segments of the Chinese population.

The fourth feature is the rise of new types of civic organizations. Compared with protests in earlier periods of PRC history, the various forms of issue-specific activism since the 1990s have an organizational basis, however fragile these organizations may be and however varied the organizational forms are. Whereas earlier studies of Chinese civil society focused on "social organizations," the term "social organizations" is increasingly reserved for officially sponsored types. The new types of civil-society organizations try to distinguish themselves with new appellations, such as NGOs, minjian organizations, and grassroots (caogen) organizations.

Fifth, popular contention since the 1990s often has more modest goals than it did in the 1980s. Protestors in the 1980s cherished grand if vague political ideals. With apocalyptic visions of or for the future, they believed in revolutionary change. Fighting for democracy and modernization were powerful rallying cries. These visions continue to inspire many activists, but since the 1990s, popular protests have articulated other, more modest goals. The defense of personal rights and interests and the expression and assertion of new identities are central concerns of the new citizen activism.

Sixth, although disruptive and confrontational protests have persisted, the new forms of contention since the 1990s are typically nondisruptive. The repertoires of collective action may best be characterized as collective civic action. Minxin Pei observes, for example, that "while the dissident movement
in the 1980s favored direct and confrontational methods of resistance, the same movement in the late 1990s began to rely increasingly on indirect and legal means. The “rightful resistance” studied by O’Brien and Li is a form of nonconfrontational contention. Much of the NGO-led activism in urban areas, such as women’s and environmental activism, adopts indirect forms of civic action such as media campaigns, public forums, exhibitions, and field trips.

The rise of China’s new citizen activism reflects the profound cultural, social, political, and economic transformations. Culturally, the repression of the student movement shattered the political idealism of the 1980s. The ensuing disillusionment and cynicism soon turned into passions for money making; even college professors quit their teaching positions to “jump into the sea” of pursuing business ventures. A culture of materialism and consumerism quickly prevailed. One consequence of the consumer revolution is the expansion of the spaces for communication. New urban social forms afforded new channels of socializing, expression, and identity exploration. There were revitalized food markets, dance halls, telephone hotlines, and even McDonald’s restaurants. Telephone became common household items after the mid-1990s. Then came the Internet and the cellphone. The economic transformations are self-evident. As I will discuss later in this chapter, much of the new citizen activism is a response to the negative social consequences of these economic transformations. Another important influence on the peculiar forms of the new citizen activism is the changing nature of state power, which I will examine in the next chapter. Suffice it to say here that since the 1990s, Chinese state power has become more decentralized and fragmented, on the one hand, and more disciplinary and capillary on the other. The new forms of citizen activism respond to the new forms of power.

The Rise of Online Activism in China

Online activism is an integral part of China’s new citizen activism, and its origins may be traced to the student movement in 1989. At that time, Chinese students and scholars overseas were already actively using e-mail and newsgroups. As protests escalated in China, an intricate web of communication emerged linking students inside China with the Chinese diaspora and the international community at large. Telephones, faxes, and the mass media played the most important role, but the Internet had a presence as well. Chinese students overseas used the Internet to raise funds for student protesters in China, issue statements of support, and organize demonstrations around the world. They would call up their friends in Chinese universities to get
event updates and then report back to the popular newsgroup SCC (Social Culture China) or e-mail list ENCS (Electronic Newsletter for Chinese Students). For example, after the crackdown on June 4, there were numerous e-mail messages in these newsgroups calling on Chinese students overseas to contact their friends and families in China and inform them of the truth. One e-mail posted at 13:53:11 GMT, June 4, 1989, had “Message from Zhejiang University!” in the subject line and reported the following:

Hi, everybody!

I called a teacher in ZU last night in order to tell people the bloodshed had happened in Beijing. I was told that ZU students held a demonstration in Hangzhou as soon as they heard the event. They have telephone contacts with the students in Beijing, and also, they can know the truth from VOA.18

Of the hundreds of Usenet newsgroups at that time, SCC became the highest ranked in online traffic during the movement period. Launched in November 1987, SCC was relatively inactive until the beginning of the student-protest movement in the spring of 1989. Only nine messages were posted in the first two months of 1989. Reflecting the tempo of the student movement, the number of messages rose to 624 in March 1989, 833 in April, 2,198 in May, and 3,183 in June.19 By April 1990, SCC had become one of the twenty most active groups among the 1,473 newsgroups on Usenet, with an estimated readership of twenty thousand.20 SCC became a success story in the history of newsgroups in the United States.21

Inside China, however, the Internet was barely known. In 1989, only a select few Chinese scientists had e-mail connections with the outside world.22 China did not achieve full-function Internet connectivity until 1994. Even then, access was limited to small numbers. Only after 1996 did the Internet begin to become available to the average urban consumer. In the first few years of Internet development in China, there were only scattered reports of Internet protests, reflecting the limited diffusion of the technology. BBS forums were to become the central space for online activism, yet the first BBS in China did not appear until 1995. When it was set up in Tsinghua University, the event turned out to be a milestone. Named SMTH (short for Shuimu Tsinghua), this BBS would become one of the most influential in China. After the first BBS was set up, others quickly followed at Beijing University, Nanjing University, Zhejiang University, Fudan University, and Xi'an Jiaotong University, among others. Thus the first contingent of BBS forums appeared in universities and major research institutions, traditionally the hotbed for contention. It is not surprising that it was in these
BBS forums that the earliest documented case of online activism happened: a nationalistic protest about the Diaoyu Islands, to which both China and Japan make territorial claims.23 There were other cases in the ensuing years, notably the worldwide protests against violence committed against ethnic Chinese in Indonesia.24

One of the defining cases of online activism in the earlier period was the protests in 1999 against the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in the former Yugoslavia. After the embassy bombing, People's Daily Online set up a BBS named “Protest Forum” for Internet users to air discontent.25 Tens of thousands of comments were posted in the forum within days. The launching of the “Protest Forum” unintentionally popularized online protest activities at a time when the Internet was just beginning to catch on in China.

Since then, online activism has increased in frequency and diversified in form. BBS remains a hotbed for contention. As blogs, online videos, and text messaging become popular, they are also used for contention. Numerous “rights defense” Web sites are set up by individuals and voluntary groups, giving rise to a new term in Chinese: “online rights defense” (wangluo weiquan). As in other countries, citizen reporters (gongmin jizhe) have appeared in China. Using blogs as their main channel of communication, they take it upon themselves to cover significant social issues ignored by the official media.

With its diversification of forms, online activism has grown in frequency and influence. Hardly a year passes without some “Internet incidents” making national news.26 These include both more culturally oriented contention and explicitly political protests. For example, in 2003 alone, half a dozen online protests happened. One of these followed the death of Sun Zhigang and led to the abolishing of an outdated government regulation about urban vagrants. Another case in the same year led to the reversal of a court verdict.27 In 2005, an online petition campaign to oppose Japan's bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council collected thirty million signatures.28 In 2007, in the so-called PX incident, residents in Xiamen successfully organized a demonstration using the Internet and text messaging to oppose the construction of a chemical factory because they believed that the chemical PX (short for para-xylene) would be harmful to their health. Few other cases of popular contention have had such direct political outcomes in such a short time. And 2008 opened with another major online protest surrounding the death of an innocent citizen at the hands of ruthless city inspectors in Tianmen, Hubei, in January (see below for more on this case), followed by the nationalistic, largely Internet-based anti-CNN campaign in April and early May and the nationwide civic mobilization in the wake of the
Sichuan earthquakes. This book is based on an analysis of over seventy cases of online contention in the past decade.

**Characteristics of Online Activism**

The features of popular contention discussed earlier—prevalence, issue multiplication, organizational base, modest goals, and nondisruptive forms—apply to online activism as well. The first feature is prevalence. It is no exaggeration to say that contention happens daily in Chinese cyberspace. As a general descriptor of social movements, the notion of “contentious conversation” is a perfect way of talking about online activism. In Chinese cyberspace, such conversations have become so common that their absence may well be more puzzling than their presence. Based on observations of online activism in Western nations, some scholars suggest that the Internet makes it possible for activists to engage in “permanent campaigns” by maintaining campaign Web sites and polycentric communication networks. Although not all cases of Chinese online activism are so permanent, some cases have been sustained for longer than many earlier protest movements. The anti-discrimination movement by hepatitis-B carriers, based on a hub of BBS forums, has been ongoing since at least 2003. Yet even the ephemeral cases of digital contention, such as online protests that happen in reaction to the beating to death of a migrant worker, are not so fleeting after all. In a sense, they are all part of a larger cycle of contention. If these cases disappear as quickly as they erupt, it is just as true that new ones may erupt at any moment. In this sense, a series of ephemeral cases of contention constitutes a “permanent campaign.”

The second feature is issue multiplication. Contentious issues online are just as numerous as they are offline. All the issues of offline activism have an online presence, while some issues that happen online may not necessarily be common offline. One case in my sample is a Web campaign launched to oppose Google’s Chinese name. When in 2006 Google announced its Chinese name, guge (literally meaning “valley song”), people began to mobilize online opposition by setting up a Web site called www.noguge.com. Activists claimed they loved Google so much that they simply could not bear its flimsy Chinese name. Online activism therefore both mirrors offline activism and has its own innovative issues.

Third, some cases of online activism have an organizational dimension. They are sustained campaigns with legitimate and independent organizational bases. The organizations have diverse forms, from formal organizations
to informal Internet-based networks. Several well-coordinated Web-based organizations, for example, ran the anti-Japanese signature petitions in 2005. Environmental NGOs often initiate Web-based campaigns.

Fourth, while some cases of online activism have clear organizational bases, others are spontaneous responses to offline injustices or are launched by individuals. These forms of protest depend crucially on the Internet network structures, where an individual may run a campaign Web site and a single posting has the chance of wide circulation. For example, several influential rights-defense Web sites were launched and are maintained by individuals. And the most influential and widely publicized online protests tend to take spontaneous forms, with large numbers of Internet users participating simultaneously but without coordination.

Fifth, current Internet user demographics, according to the biannual survey results published by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), suggest that participants in online activism are mostly urban residents and that many, perhaps the majority, are young people. Beyond that, however, there is considerable diversity in gender, age, and occupational background. Computer hackers in nationalist protests were mostly young college students. The online petition to request that the Ministry of Culture ban the film “Lust, Caution” at the end of 2007 was launched by a group of college students. The Web-based charity organization 1kg.org is made up mainly of college students. Those engaged in more politically subversive activities, such as human-rights activists, appear to be mostly above college-age. For instance, of the fifty-four individuals arrested for Internet-related political activities listed by Amnesty International in 2004, age information is available for thirty-seven. Their average age in 2004 was thirty-six, meaning that most of them probably had personal experiences in the 1989 student movement. Only six of them were under twenty years of age in 2004.

Among other activists for which biographical information is available, Hu Jia was born in 1973 and was a journalist before turning into a full-time NGO- and human-rights activist. Liu Di, the Stainless Steel Mouse, was a college student when she started publishing subversive essays on the Internet. She was twenty-one years old when taken into police custody in 2002. Zola Zhou, the citizen blogger who covered the “nail house incident” in Chongqing in 2007, was a vegetable vendor and the same age as Liu Di. And of course, Liu Xiaobo, who has initiated many online petitions, is a veteran of the 1989 movement. The diversity of participants in online activism indicates both the broad scale of the social crisis in China today and the generalized societal responses it has provoked.
Sixth, compared with large-scale protests in the past, online activism has more concrete and modest goals. From the Democracy Wall movement to the student movement in 1989, protestors cherished grand political ideals and agitated for revolutionary change. Online activism rarely demands radical political change. The struggles are about social justice, citizenship rights, cultural values, and personal identity.

Seventh, consistent with its goals, online activism tends to adopt moderate and symbolic means. In the worldwide antiglobalization movements, online extensions of conventional forms of radical protests are common. In lieu of sit-ins in public spaces, there are virtual sit-ins. In lieu of the destruction of public property or the seizing and occupation of public spaces, there is the hacking of Web sites, e-mail bombing, and various forms of electronic disturbance. These radical forms of electronic contention are often used in online mobilization concerning nationalistic issues, but they are less common in protests about other issues. The main forms of Chinese online activism include setting up campaign Web sites, online petitions, mass mailing of action alerts, posting and crossposting messages in BBS forums, downloading posts for offline circulation, online broadcast of offline activities in personal blogs and online forums, and so forth.

Symbolic and discursive expressions are an important part of online activism. Internet contention is radical communicative action conducted in words, images, and sounds. Language, stories, and symbols have always been an important part of popular movements, but they have taken on new possibilities in the information age. As Mark Poster argues, just as material resources are central to the Marxist mode of production in the industrial age, so linguistic resources have become central to the information age. It is for similar reasons that Alberto Melucci views contemporary social movements as symbolic challenges.

Online Activism as Countermovement

If Chinese online activism is a countermovement against the consequences of Chinese modernity, it is of a more complex kind than that studied by Karl Polanyi. In Polanyi's original formulation in *The Great Transformation*, the destructive forces of the unregulated market triggered societal resistance. In response, society rose up spontaneously in a countermovement to defend itself. A countermovement in the Polanyian sense has three distinct features. It originates most forcefully from deep material grievances, it targets the predatory activities of the market, and it is spontaneous. In China's
case, there is one additional crucial element: the targets are not limited to the market but also include local government authorities. This is because of the predatory and fragmented nature of the Chinese state. The predatory activities of the state are a source of serious grievances. Its fragmentation and problematic central-local relations are sources of political opportunities for collective action. To maintain power, the central leadership will not tolerate activities that directly challenge its legitimacy. It may, however, tolerate and even encourage grassroots protests that target local leadership and local practices.

In Polanyi’s analysis, the state aligned with society in the countermovement against the market. The Chinese state in the reform period is never unambiguously on the side of society. More often, it is an advocate of the market. It is only after the rise of the countermovement that the state is alerted to the destructive potentials of the market. Even here, it is not a uniform state but mainly the central state that attempts to rein in the market for fear that the countermovement may threaten its own legitimacy. The local state is best understood as a form of local state corporatism. It is not surprising then that this business-centered local state should defend business interests. The local state is a target of protest rather than a supporter.

Invoking Polanyi’s notion of a countermovement, many scholars have argued, implicitly or explicitly, that popular contention in China constitutes a countermovement. Thus worker protests are largely rooted in grievances incurred by labor commodification and industrial restructuring. Rural protesters make defensive and reactive claims against the violation of existing entitlements, such as land seizures, illegal agricultural fees, or industrial pollution of water sources. Similarly, the more recent urban environmental activism and homeowners’ resistance are struggles to defend newly gained property rights and a healthy human habitat. A study of Chinese retirees’ struggles for pension proposes to bring grievances back into the field of collective action, arguing that “large, suddenly imposed grievances and ‘disruptions of the quotidien’ arising from resource loss can play a critical role in inspiring collective action.” These studies show convincingly that contemporary popular contention reflects social opposition to the dark side of the “great transformation” of China. How does online activism fit into this picture?

Insofar as Internet contention responds to the negative consequences of China’s market transformation, it is part of the larger countermovement in Chinese society. At least twenty cases of online protests, close to one-third in my sample, involve spontaneous online protests in response to grave social injustices. The issues typically involve the death of vulnerable persons and corrupt or derelict government officials. The uproar over Sun Zhigang's
death was a case in point. Sun died from a beating on March 20, 2003, while in police custody in Guangzhou. He had been taken into custody three days earlier because he lacked a temporary residency permit. After the news about his death broke, an outraged public filled the Web with debates and protests, expressing sympathy for the victim and demanding criminal prosecution of the suspects. As often is the case, the protest went beyond Sun Zhigang’s death. Discussions ranged from how to curb police brutality to the protection of the rights of disadvantaged social groups (ruoshi qunti). They reflected the widespread grievances over social inequalities.

The spontaneity of online protest is a matter of degree. Insofar as protests arise from uncoordinated individual participation in online forums, they are spontaneous. This is what media sociologist John Thompson means by “concerted but uncoordinated responsive action.” Such action arises “when individuals react in similar ways to mediated actions, utterances, or events, although the individuals are situated in diverse contexts and there is no communication or coordination between them.” The lack of communication among distant others is generally true of television, the focus of Thompson’s study. This condition changes with the interactivity of the Internet. Interactivity enhances coordination and deliberation and thus changes the basic dynamics of protest diffusion, but it does not make it more or less spontaneous. During the protests in 1989, students insisted that theirs was a spontaneous movement despite all forms of formal or informal organizing. As Craig Calhoun argues, students’ claims to spontaneity were ways of denying manipulation and asserting autonomy and authenticity: “Part of the attraction of claims to spontaneity was their affirmation of the distinctiveness and individual freedom that the movement itself proclaimed. . . . Words like ‘spontaneous’ also carried connotations of authenticity and naturalness; these were celebrated attributes of the movement.”

The notions of authenticity and naturalness carry profound moral sensibilities. They make spontaneous protests morally compelling. As Calhoun shows, student heroism in 1989 was inseparable from this sense of authenticity. Likewise, the spontaneous character of the countermovement in Polanyi’s analysis springs from the moral roots of the opposition. Polanyi argues that the countermovement is ultimately driven not by economic interests but by social interests. These social interests are matters of culture and moral values, matters concerning human dignity and self-respect. “Purely economic matters such as affect want-satisfaction are incomparably less relevant to class behavior than questions of social recognition,” he writes.

Spontaneous online protests in China convey a moral sense. When citizens spontaneously join a protest against acts of injustice, they are
responding to a sense of moral calling. The inability to respond implies a moral failure. Conversely, the spontaneous expressions of outrage indicate moral integrity. Spontaneity appears to be in direct proportion to the gravity of injustice. The more outrageous the incidents, the more spontaneous the protests. Spontaneity of protests thus becomes a measure of the conditions of a society. Where spontaneous protests happen more frequently and at larger scales, society must be in deeper trouble. On January 7, 2008, Wei Wenhua was beaten to death by city inspectors (chengguan) in the city of Tianmen in Hubei merely because he tried to photograph them beating up villagers who were protesting the city's trash-dumping policy. Wei's death provoked widespread protests in cyberspace. Netizens in Tianya forums posted thousands of angry comments within days. One person named “volunteer200” commented, “we must push this posting [about Wei's death]. Otherwise we will be the next one to be killed.”53 Another person with the user ID “bbwap” sent in a comment by cellphone: “What a world is this? If we don't push this posting, are we still human beings! Where is Heaven's justice?” A third comment reads: “I've run out of my anger. The savageness is unbearable to see.”54 These words of protest express a moral sense of social justice.55

Online Activism as an Identity Movement

Polanyi's concern with issues of dignity and self-respect implies a concern with identity and recognition, but his analysis ultimately leans toward material grievances. Polanyi's analysis helps capture a central part of popular contention in contemporary China, but not all of it. Many cases of online activism in China are manifestations of such a countermovement. Others, however, are not simply about material grievances, and just as many are organized rather than spontaneous. What are they about?

I argue that they are manifestations of an identity movement. This identity movement is expressed both as resistance against the loss of control and as struggles for recognition. It is a movement about identity politics. Identity, as Calhoun puts it, “turns on the interrelated problems of self-recognition and recognition by others.” Identity politics are struggles because “other people, groups, and organizations (including states) are called upon to respond” and “because they involve refusing, diminishing, or displacing identities others wish to recognize in individuals.”56 The identity movement assumes the forms of positive struggles to assert alternative or suppressed lifestyles and identities. Various forms of anti-
discrimination movements among hepatitis-B carriers, gay communities, and HIV/AIDS patients are such struggles. Those who participate in organized online charitable action, as in the case of 1kg.org, are engaged in such efforts of self-realization. Communities of memory, which flourish in Chinese cyberspace, are communities of identity. Even those young people who publish private diaries and photographs in their blogs are engaged in identity struggles, because these are ways of seeking communication and understanding. Online activism thus constitutes an identity movement in two ways. One is its expressive dimension. The other is protest and contention. Both express an inner crisis.

The identity movement is rooted in the market transformation of Chinese society and the sense of identity crisis it creates. Charles Taylor considers identity crisis as "an acute form of disorientation, which people often express in terms of not knowing who they are, but which can also be seen as a radical uncertainty of where they stand." The identity crisis in China today differs from the "crisis of faith" at the beginning of the reform era. That was a crisis of faith in party leadership and communist ideology, expressed most poignantly by the disillusioned generation of the Cultural Revolution. The Democracy Wall movement expressed this crisis, as did the national debate in 1980 about the meaning of life provoked by Pan Xiao's letter to the editor. Yet as I noted above, despite its vehement rejection of the Cultural Revolution and calls for political reform, the Democracy Wall movement retained the ideals of the Chinese enlightenment project. The belief crisis served only as a foil for stronger expressions of hope and keener yearnings for change. The dominant mood throughout the 1980s was a yearning for change. Lu Xing'er, a novelist of the Cultural Revolution generation, articulated this mood in the following terms:

At that time [1986], I was still full of pride for our generation. My stories about our generation are optimistic and cheerful. ... My characters have knowingly inherited the tradition, yet under the burden of history, they still unequivocally yearn to accept and create a new life. For a generation that links the past, the present, and the future, the combination and conflict of the old and the new manifest themselves in thoughts of the most complicated and helpless kind. In 1986 and 1987, there still seemed to be various ways of resolving these problems.

Change is the cause of today's identity crisis, not the basis of hope. The Cultural Revolution generation was the first to experience and articulate this sense of loss. The wave of nostalgia among the Cultural Revolution generation
in the 1990s expressed a concern for meaning and identity newly problematized by the conditions of contemporary life. After describing the sense of optimism in the 1980s, Lu Xing'er, writing in 1998, conveys the sense of disorientation she experienced in the 1990s:

In the past year or two, however, rapid changes in the economy, consciousness, ideas, and human relations have exacerbated the problems to such an extent that they have become bewildering. Problems can be faced and solved. When they begin to bewilder, so that people are at a loss what to do about them, then they become the most profound predicaments. We find ourselves in such predicaments now.  

The symptoms of this identity crisis are everywhere. One symptom is the proliferation of self-help manuals about happiness and the meaning of life. In the summer of 2007, on a visit to a large bookstore in Beijing, I randomly took note of the following popular book titles:

Ren weishenme huozhe [Why do people live?]
Xingfu shi shenme [What is happiness?]
Wo de rensheng biji [My notebook about human life]
Wu mudi de meihao shenghuo [A beautiful life without a goal]
Ping shenme huozhe [For what reason do we live?]
You yizhong xinqing jiao liulang [There is a feeling called wandering]
Rensheng congci bu jimo [Life will not be lonely anymore]
Qingting yu sushuo [Listening and speaking]
Xinling chufang [Prescriptions for the soul]
Xinling zhinan [A guidebook for the soul]
Xinling ticao [Acrobatics for the soul]

Some of these are the works of well-known authors such as Liu Xinwu, Chen Zhongshi, and Wang Xiaoni. Others belong to the new breed of popular writers who specialize in life advice.

Yu Dan is the best example of this phenomenon. Yu Dan's popular writings about the ancient Chinese philosophies of Kongzi and Zhuangzi sold millions of copies, to the envy of experts who have made the study of Kongzi or Zhuangzi their lifelong career. She lectures on Kongzi and Zhuangzi on national television and has become a national phenomenon, due to her ability to turn classics into self-help manuals to alleviate contemporary anxieties and tell people how to cope in an increasingly unmanageable world. Here is Yu Dan talking:
When we are at work, we have to face our boss, our colleagues, our career. When we go home, we have to face our family; we do not want them to worry for us. Every day in this world, we put on too many faces for others. But what do we really want deep at heart? . . . Do we still know what our inner voice really is? . . . When we face ourselves, we become ever more perplexed with every passing day.63

If this passage sounds familiar to some readers, this should not come as a surprise, for Yu Dan echoes Janette Rainwater, whose 1989 book *Self-Therapy: A Guide to Becoming Your Own Therapist* provides the raw material for Anthony Giddens’s argument about the crisis of self-identity. Below is a passage from *Self-Therapy* quoted by Giddens:

 Possibly you’re feeling restless. Or you may feel overwhelmed by the demands of wife, husband, children, or job. You may feel unappreciated by those people closest to you. Perhaps you feel angry that life is passing you by and you haven’t accomplished all those great things you had hoped to do. Something feels missing from your life. You wish you were in charge. What to do?64

The consanguinity between these two passages betrays a structural affinity between Chinese modernity and Western modernity. It invites a comparison of China’s identity-oriented online activism with the “new social movements” (NSMs) in Western societies. Theories about NSMs trace them to structural changes in Western societies and the concordant value changes. The argument is that NSMs have arisen to replace “old” movements as the dominant social movements in a postmaterial, postindustrial society. Whereas “old” movements were concerned with material progress and distributive conflicts, NSMs are about personal autonomy and self-realization. Labor movements were the archetypal “old” movements; peace and environmental movements represent the new movements. The politics of “old” movements was about emancipation, about “liberating individuals and groups from constraints which adversely affect their life chances.”65 In contrast, “new” movements are about life politics and are concerned with political issues that “flow from processes of self-actualization in post-traditional contexts.”66

Chinese modernity shares both historical connections and structural affinities with Western modernity. Chinese modernizers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century embraced the values of the European Enlightenment as the cultural engine of a modern China. The same mix of institutional conditions, with the capitalistic industrial and market system
as the centerpiece, is directly responsible for the dramatic transformation of Chinese society in the reform era. Yet both in its causes and consequences, Chinese modernity at the dawn of the twenty-first century has its historically specific characteristics. If Western modernity has entered the stage of reflexive modernity dominated by life politics, Chinese modernity is bifurcated or, in the words of the Chinese sociologist Sun Liping, "fractured." The Chinese economy develops rapidly; Chinese society polarizes just as quickly. Large proportions of the Chinese population have not emerged from the conditions of economic scarcity even as growing numbers are embracing prosperity. As a middle class takes form, so does a poor class.

The fractured nature of contemporary Chinese modernity explains the nature of China's new citizen activism. Chinese citizen activism does not just focus on life politics; it combines life politics with emancipatory politics. Contention arising from a fragmented society thus branches into two currents: a countermovement rooted in material grievances and an identity movement rooted in aspirations for recognition and belonging. Part of the criticism of the new social movement paradigm is directed at its exaggeration of discontinuity, as if at some magical historical juncture "new" movements suddenly arose to replace the old. As I noted earlier, my analysis of China's new citizen activism highlights its new features without underestimating its continuity with the past.

What are some of the manifestations of online activism as an identity movement?

**Ming's Story: Fighting Discrimination Against Diabetes Patients**

On November 21, 2007, barely three months after starting college at the Shandong University of Chinese Medicine, Ming (a pseudonym) was notified by his university that his admission had been nullified and was asked to withdraw from college. The notice stated that Ming was a Type 1 diabetes patient and therefore did not meet the health requirements for college admission. Ming was devastated. Getting a college education is a rare opportunity in China—and rarer still for children from poor rural areas. Ming was one of the small minority of country kids to gain college admission in an extremely competitive national test. Now he faced the prospect of being expelled for a health condition.

Two days before receiving the official notice, Ming had posted a message in an Internet bulletin board asking for help. The subject line of the message reads: "Urgent: What Should I Do If My College Asks Me to Withdraw?"
Upon receiving the notice, Ming posted another message: "The verdict has been delivered. . . Now there is no way out."

Ming's messages were posted in a forum run by diabetes patients and drew many sympathetic responses from members of the forum. Some people immediately began to mobilize public support for Ming. They launched an online petition and used their personal networks to contact the mass media. On November 24, the provincial television station covered Ming's story. After the four-minute video was posted online, it received over 300,000 hits within two days. Chinese netizens debated the case heatedly and showed overwhelming support for Ming. Facing such public pressure, Ming's college issued an official response, which stated that the decision had been reached on the basis of the health requirements set out for college admission by the Ministry of Education. As of December 25, 2007, Ming remained in college and there were discussions online about the possibility of Ming taking legal action.

Ming's case brings a long-standing issue into the public sphere. College admission in China has always required applicants to take health tests. Those who fail are refused admission. But are the health requirements constitutional? Few people have questioned this, including the applicants themselves. One reason for this is discrimination out of ignorance. Ming said in interviews with media that he had had this disease for a long time, but back home he kept it from his school and classmates because in his home town people thought diabetes was infectious. Another reason is the lack of shared consciousness among patients and their families. Not knowing that others are being turned away from college for the same reason, people do not challenge government regulations. Third, there must have been individual complaints before, but they never became an issue of public debate because there was no way for the complaints to be communicated to the public. The reason why Ming's case became widely publicized was that he cried out for help online. Many people expressed their sympathy and support because they shared his concern. One person commented that Ming's situation reminded him of his own daughter's future, who was not yet college age but too was suffering from diabetes. Another wrote:

This is serious discrimination against diabetes patients. As long as they control their sugar level, diabetes patients are no different from other people. Does this mean all diabetes patients in our society must be dismissed from work or school? Can society guarantee the subsistence of this group? . . . We are building a harmonious society. If even basic human subsistence cannot be guaranteed, what harmony is there to talk about? Patients are human beings too. They have the right to existence and should be protected by society."
It is out of such concern that an online petition was launched to request the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health to protect the educational rights of diabetes patients.

Ming’s story exemplifies the identity struggles in online activism. It is about social recognition as much as it is about material grievances. It is one man’s story, a story the protagonist had long kept to himself because of the social pressure in a discriminatory cultural environment. The immediate threat of dismissal from college gave him the courage to stand up for himself. He started his struggle on the Internet in an online community that gave him sympathy and support. His story turned into a social issue and became an occasion for many others to share their personal anxieties and make contentious claims. The challenges against government policies were political, but the claims were more about the assertion of self-worth in a discriminatory society. Ming’s story is just one of many. Many other social groups—migrants, gays and lesbians, hepatitis-B carriers, faith believers—who suffer from marginalization or discrimination are taking their struggles online. Collectively, they make up an ever expanding identity movement in Chinese cyberspace.

Conclusion

China is in an age of contention. Since the 1990s, popular protests have multiplied and the forms and issues of contention have diversified. This chapter outlines the main forms of contention and situates online activism in the broader landscape. I argued that despite continuities, China’s new citizen activism marks some significant differences from social movements of the past. It differs in at least six respects from the student-dominated protests of the 1980s. It happens more frequently, involves a broader range of issues, has a broader social base, can be both spontaneous or organized, pursues modest and mundane goals, and adopts both time-honored and confrontational repertoires and innovative, nondisruptive forms.

Online activism emerged from the same historical process and constitutes an integral part of this new citizen activism. Although Chinese students overseas were already using the Internet to aid their fellow students at home in 1989, inside China, the development of the Internet—and the rise of Internet activism more specifically—paralleled the development of this new citizen activism. Both processes started in the early 1990s. Online activism thus manifests the same features as the broader citizen activism of which it is a part.

This new citizen activism responds to the structural transformations of Chinese society. A main consequence of these transformations is social
polarization and fracture. Largely spontaneous protests occur online in reaction to incidents of grave social injustice. These make up a Polanyi-type countermovement. At the same time, online activism is expressed as struggles for recognition. This aspect is rooted in the identity crisis associated with structurally induced social dislocation.

There is a long-term debate in social-movement studies about the relevant significance of grievances and political opportunities and movement resources in movement mobilization. My analysis of the structural origins of China's new citizen activism indicates the continuing relevance of the concept of grievances and dislocation in social-movement explanation. What needs to be stressed is that widespread and deep grievances, to the extent that they indicate a generalized social crisis, tend to provoke more spontaneous forms of protest as people rise up to defend themselves and their communities from destruction. That is why proponents of this perspective deemphasize the importance of organizations for mobilization. Yet this does not invalidate arguments about the centrality of organization to popular contention. The prevalence of protest reflects structural conditions of grievances, yet the forms of protest respond to a different set of conditions, including movement resources and political opportunities. The analysis of the structural conditions of Chinese online activism thus provides only the beginning of an inquiry. It cannot explain the peculiar forms it takes. The rest of the book is devoted to detailed analyses of different aspects of online activism to reveal their dynamics, forms, and consequences. I begin with the relations between state power and online activism.