Huawei Becomes Proxy for Public Criticism of Party-State

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Executive Summary: Beijing has made Huawei the standard-bearer of the high-tech sector in the People's Republic of China (PRC), and content that questions the company is routinely met with complaints and takedowns. Mocking Huawei has therefore become a proxy for public criticism of the Party-state.

- A third-party test published on October 8 showed the brake pedal bracket of the Maextro V800, a car launched by Huawei, breaking under repeated emergency braking. The test video then disappeared from multiple platforms, and online mockery moved from the brakes to censorship and to Huawei's political backers.
- Efforts to shield Huawei have spread the mockery further. Some official accounts have publicly urged the company to accept discussion, indicating that parts of the system regard criticism of Huawei as permissible. Since the brake pedal incident, central state media have declined to come to Huawei's defense, and the central leadership may keep its distance from the company in future propaganda.

On October 8, Dongchedi (□□□), a car review platform in the People's Republic of China (PRC), published a video of a brake test, where three new Maextro (□□) V800s made repeated emergency stops from 100 kilometers per hour. The brake pedal bracket broke on all three (China National Radio, October 8). **[1]** The car, built by Anhui Jianghuai Automobile (JAC; □□□□), was launched by Huawei in August at prices from renminbi (RMB) 766,000 ($114,000) to RMB 1.02 million ($150,000). Its official website advertises the safety design as "multiple redundancies, as stable as Mount Tai" (□□□□□□□□□) and states that the vehicle's architecture includes redundancy in braking, steering, computing, perception, positioning, interaction, communications, and power supply (HIMA, accessed October 9). JAC's shares fell to the circuit-breaker limit during trading that day and again once markets opened the following day (21st Century Business Herald, October 9).

The story quickly turned into one of censorship. From late that night, the test video displayed the message "submission invalid" (□□□□) on Bilibili, a leading PRC video-sharing platform, while WeChat Channels showed a notice stating that, following user complaints and platform review, the video had been found to contain content that violated the platform rules. The notice left both the complainant and the reason unstated (Xinhuanghe, October 9). By the next day, Internet users found that the original video and many reposts had been removed from Douyin, Bilibili, Weibo, and other platforms. Among comments from users inside the PRC relayed by the X account "Teacher Li Is Not Your Teacher" (□□□□□□□□), one read, "it must be said that Huawei has achieved, on the Party's behalf, strong leadership over the theoretical mouthpieces and the public opinion front" (□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□) (X/@whyyoutouzhele, October 9). **[2]**

The comment borrows the vocabulary of Party control over the media and applies it to a company, Huawei, that holds special status in the PRC. Officials treat Huawei as the representative of Chinese high-tech firms suppressed by the United States, its critics are often accused of smearing domestic

brands, and online content that questions it is frequently taken down by censors. This particular protectiveness on behalf of the authorities, coupled with the difficulties entailed in raising issues of censorship, privilege, and unequal justice directly with the regime, has led to Huawei becoming a proxy for public criticism of the Party-state.

Beijing Makes Huawei a National Symbol

U.S. sanctions turned Huawei into an object of patriotic consumption. In May 2019, the U.S. Department of Commerce added Huawei to the Entity List, restricting sales by U.S. firms to the company (Federal Register, May 21, 2019). Promotions and patriotic sentiment then drove a surge in its smartphone sales at home (Reuters, August 5, 2019). Huawei founder Ren Zhengfei (□□□) remarked wryly at the time that "one cannot say that using Huawei products is patriotic and that not using them is unpatriotic" (□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□) (BBC, May 21, 2019).

During the Meng Wanzhou (□□□) affair, officials presented Huawei's plight as the nation's plight. On September 25, 2021, Meng, who is Huawei's chief financial officer and Ren's daughter, returned to Shenzhen after nearly three years of detention in Canada. Xinhua headlined its report with her words at the airport, "If faith has a color, it must be China red!" (□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□) (Xinhua, September 25, 2021). Two days later, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) spokesperson stated that the case's "purpose was to suppress Chinese high-tech enterprises represented by Huawei" (□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□□) (MFA, September 27, 2021). Canadian and U.S. authorities had initially arrested her for charges of wire fraud that violated U.S. sanctions on Iran, though these were dismissed once a plea deal had been reached.

The state also backs Huawei with money and political favor. Materials from the U.S. Semiconductor Industry Association reported by Bloomberg indicate that Huawei obtained about $30 billion from the central government and the Shenzhen municipal government (Bloomberg, August 23, 2023). In February 2025, at a symposium on private enterprise chaired by General Secretary Xi Jinping, Ren was listed first among the six business leaders who spoke (Xinhua, February 19, 2025). In recent years, private technology firms in the PRC have generally aligned themselves with national strategy before receiving explicit instructions (China Brief, March 20). Huawei has gone further, however, and has become part of the national narrative itself.

This status also shields Huawei from criticism. One PRC technology commentator has said outright that Huawei long enjoyed a degree of protection in public opinion under the national narrative (HK01, August 6). In late 2025, the well-known internet personality Luo Yonghao (□□□) was likewise accused of "smearing national industry" (□□□□□) after he joked about "far ahead" (□□□□), a catchphrase from Huawei's product launches (Sina Finance, January 3). After the brake incident, an industry insider still publicly questioned "certain media outlets that gain traffic at the expense of Chinese brands' reputations" (□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□) (JRJ, October 9). In an atmosphere that binds Huawei tightly to patriotism, questioning its products is easily cast as opposing the country.

Pushback Ranges From Parody to Political Satire

Criticizing a company is far safer in the PRC than criticizing the Party or the government. Consumer complaints about product quality are an officially recognized right, and China Central Television (CCTV) devotes a broadcast every March 15 to exposing errant firms. Huawei is at once a company open to consumer complaint and one that officials treat as a representative of the nation. Those who mock it can therefore claim that they are simply discussing product quality.

Public pushback against Huawei falls into roughly three categories. The first is parody, which targets the company's marketing language. For instance, in July, Internet users decided that the

“wah-wah” sound a traditional toy, the bamboo cicada (□□□), makes when shaken resembled both the voice of Huawei executive Yu Chengdong (□□□) at product launches and the gasps of his audiences. Borrowing his description of the Aito (□□) M9 as “the best SUV under RMB 10 million” (1000□□□□□□SUV), they dubbed the toy “the best toy under RMB 10 million” (□□□□□□□□□□) (21st Century Business Herald, August 7).

Huawei’s reaction gave the parody political meaning. Its legal department filed mass complaints with platforms, alleging that the videos used metaphor, homophones, altered audio, and other veiled means to vilify and mock the company and its executives (21st Century Business Herald, August 3). **[3]** The complaints reminded one commentator of an earlier case, in which a Shanghai media professional wrote a poem about cicadas that his employer judged to be an allusion to Xi. His Weibo post was deleted and his account silenced (China Digital Times, August 10).

The second way in which public pushback occurs is questioning, which targets how Huawei treats ordinary people. In December 2018, Shenzhen police detained former Huawei employee Li Hongyuan (□□□) after the company reported him. The following August, prosecutors declined to indict him, citing unclear facts and insufficient evidence. He had spent 251 days in custody and later received state compensation. Huawei responded that it “has the right, and also the obligation” (□□□□□□□□) to report suspected illegal conduct to the judicial authorities, adding that it supported him in using legal means to defend his rights and interests, including by suing Huawei (Yicai, December 2, 2019). One outlet summarized a metaphor then circulating online as “the elephant stamps once, and the ant may stamp back. The rights are the same, the damage vastly different” (□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□) (The Cover, December 3, 2019).

Censorship turned this labor dispute into a protest against speech controls. Internet users flooded the comments beneath an open letter that Meng had published at the time with the string “985, 996, 251, 404.” The four numbers refer, respectively, to elite university credentials, the work schedule of 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. six days a week, the days Li spent in custody, and the error code displayed when a web page has been deleted. These comments were subsequently removed as well. The New York Times reported that many people in the PRC were especially outraged by the censorship of news coverage and online responses. They said that they had felt helpless at being unable to criticize the government and now felt that they were “also not able to criticize a giant corporation” (The New York Times, December 4, 2019).

The third category of pushback ties Huawei directly to the Party-state. This includes comments such as those posted after the Maextro video was taken down that Huawei had achieved “strong leadership” on the Party’s behalf. On X, one user wrote that blocking and removal across the entire Internet was a concrete expression of “stressing politics” (□□□), a discipline that the Party requires of cadres and the media (X/@justicefallen20, October 9). Another was blunter, asking “whose company is Huawei? If we cannot deal with the red sun, can we at least deal with you, Huawei?” (□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□) (X/@Neo_Marici, October 9). The user’s meaning is that those who are powerless against Xi can vent their anger on Huawei.

Efforts to Shield Huawei Backfire

In the past, and especially after the Meng Wanzhou affair, propagandists could readily turn measures to protect Huawei to their advantage. In June 2019, Shenzhen police acted on a report from Huawei and placed two people in administrative detention for spreading rumors in WeChat groups, among them a claim that Huawei employees had spied for the United States (Xinhua, June 13, 2019). As the Li Hongyuan case gathered attention, the Global Times asserted that many Internet users had redirected their criticism toward foreign media, believing that the United States was exploiting the case to smear Huawei (Global Times, December 6, 2019).

Today, Huawei more often handles public opinion through legal complaints. **[4]** During the bamboo cicada affair, the Harmony Intelligent Mobility Alliance (HIMA; □□□□), Huawei's automotive business, stated on August 4 that it respected normal online expression and well-intentioned criticism. It said that it had filed complaints against only 171 of the more than 56,000 related posts it had monitored, that platforms had removed 144 of them, and that its targets were malicious edits, imitations of executives' voices, and similar content (IT Home, August 4). Some bloggers countered that videos that merely showed the toy had also been taken down (21st Century Business Herald, August 3). At one point, a Weibo search for "bamboo cicada" came back nearly empty (Storm Media, August 7).

Huawei's heavy-handed approach backfired. The content it complained about spread more widely. Internet users bought bamboo cicadas to film their own versions, captioned with phrases such as "the lingering sound circles the rafters" (□□□□), which plays on the character for Yu's surname, and "shaking ahead" (□□□□), a pun on Yu's slogan, which was named one of the top ten internet buzzwords of 2023 (The Paper, December 8, 2023; HK01, August 3). One outlet called this Huawei's "Streisand effect," in which an attempt to suppress information spreads it further (Storm Media, August 7). As a Caixin commentary argued, the affair had weakened Huawei's sacred aura in the public mind and brought latent public opinion into the open (Caixin, August 6).

The extent of the backlash became clear when official media ceased to speak with one voice in Huawei's defense. On August 5, the WeChat account of the Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee's propaganda department wrote that the stronger a company is, the more open it should be to discussion (WeChat/Zhejiang Xuanchuan, August 5). A commentary the same day in the official newspaper of the Jiangsu Provincial Party Committee likewise observed that Huawei could hardly avoid giving the impression of overzealous rights protection and of making a fuss over a trifle (Xinhua Daily, August 5). Provincial propaganda organs had stepped in to urge a company to be magnanimous. The space for criticizing Huawei is evidently far wider than that for criticizing Party and government bodies.

The brake incident in October played out as a replay of the bamboo cicada affair. First came efforts to absolve Huawei. Weibo chief executive Wang Gaofei (□□□) replied to a user that JAC had built the car and that the making of a brake pedal lay outside Huawei's "empowerment" (□□) role (ITHome, October 8). Next came attacks on the tester. Dongchedi's head of testing said that his phone had been bombarded with text messages (MyDrivers, October 9). Then the video was taken down, and the target of mockery moved from the brake pedal to censorship. One Weibo user wrote that the takedown merely "hammered nails into Maextro's coffin lid" (□□□□□□□□□□□□) (Weibo, October 9). The official WeChat account of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) government then published an article criticizing Maextro for evading the question. It drew more than 100,000 views within half a day and was hidden by the account that evening (Lianhe Zaobao, October 10). Two days later, Zhejiang Xuanchuan weighed in again. It noted that the test video could no longer be viewed on multiple platforms and that many posts discussing it had vanished, and it called the habit of dismissing safety questions as smears against domestic cars an "irrational mentality of shielding one's own" (□□□□□□□□) (Zhejiang Xuanchuan, October 12). On October 13, Maextro published a third-party test report stating that the brake pedal met the industry standard, but the testing institution said that the report applied only to the samples the company had submitted and offered no guarantee for vehicles in mass production (Yicai, October 13). As of this article's publication, the episode is still unfolding.

Conclusion

By making Huawei a national symbol, Beijing has allowed the company to become a target of public discontent, deflecting people's ire from the authorities themselves. Mockery of Huawei uses the

same homophones and veiled allusions as mockery of the Party-state. While it also draws complaints and takedowns, it does so at a far lower cost. Huawei is the most prominent firm in Beijing's narrative of technological self-reliance. As public deference toward it declines, the persuasiveness of that narrative declines with it.

The Party may already have realized that the public is magnifying Huawei's problems as a way of alluding to the Party-state, which is perhaps why central media declined to defend Huawei as they had in 2019. On October 10, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) and three other departments solicited public comment on a draft notice that tightens the management of automotive research, development, testing, and validation (MIIT, October 10). The next day, the *People's Daily* named the Maextro V800 and declared that "a car's brake pedal should never 'break' while driving" (□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□'□□') (People's Daily, October 11). Beijing will continue to hold up Huawei as the standard-bearer of high-tech enterprise, but it may keep the company at a greater distance in its propaganda and defend its privileges less conspicuously.

Notes

[1] The brackets on the three cars broke on the third, fourth, and second stops, respectively. Dongchedi stated that seven other models with plastic pedal brackets completed six stops intact, and it rejected the charge that it had conducted "violent testing" (□□□□) (ITHome, October 8).

[2] "Teacher Li Is Not Your Teacher" (@whyyoutouzhele) is run by Li Ying (□□), a Chinese artist based in Italy who has long compiled submissions and comments from internet users inside the PRC. X is blocked in the PRC. The X users cited here are most likely overseas or using circumvention tools, and both their identities and those of the users who submitted comments remain unverified.

[3] Homophones and veiled allusion are also the techniques that PRC internet users commonly employ to evade censorship and discuss sensitive political topics. Such expression resembles what James C. Scott called the "hidden transcript" of the weak, in which discontent is voiced through rumor, ambiguity, and jokes. See James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

[4] Other large firms also use legal means against critics. In June 2025, BYD said that it was suing 37 "smear accounts" (□□) and had placed another 126 accounts on a watch list (Jiemian News, June 4, 2025).

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