This paper addresses a very interesting and timely topic and provides a nice review of the literature. However, this paper has two major conceptual problems.

The first main problem with this article is that it tries to collapse what is a two level game into a confused single level game. Fundamentally, audience costs arguments posit that a state will generate audience costs to make its negotiating situation more credible; that it will not be able to back down from its commitments due to the audience costs it has generated.

So my read of what China is doing is trying to signal to international adversaries that it cannot back down because of the audience costs generated – it is unwilling to face the consequences of backing down. The authors are making a different audience cost argument – that somehow the threat of revolution will make the Chinese government’s foreign policy commitments more credible. But, to my eyes, shouldn’t the Japanese (or whatever adversary) want revolution in China? The connection between revolution and credible audience costs is very confused in the paper as is.

Instead, I think it is more helpful to consider the protests in China as a two level game. The first level is between China and its international adversaries in which audience costs can play a useful role. The second level of the game is between the state and the protestors – the state wants authentic protest that doesn’t go to far while the protestors have their own interests.

I think the lack of conceptual clarity would be much eased if these two issues were considered separately in the paper.

The second main issue is that the data is very weak for the claims made. The large theoretical superstructure of the argument rests on the thin reed of an interesting but perhaps random or one-off Weibo censorship response to a particular event. To be truly convincing, I would want to see more fine-grained data over a number of days and events. As it is, it is interesting speculation but not enough to hang a whole argument.

Related to this issue is that there is no clear link between online activism and offline activism – this link is asserted but not proven or widely accepted in the literature. Moreover, to generate audience costs that actually signal an adversary as to the credibility of the original state’s commitment, the development of audience costs must be observable. Are Weibo posts observable to the Japanese government? One might develop an argument that they are but the authors will need to provide evidence.

There are a number of small things that could be improved on in the article – much of the writing sounds awkward and could use careful review. But until the conceptual issues are resolved these issues are secondary.