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Participatory Democracy in the Chinese Cyber World: Case Studies from Weibo

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Participatory Democracy in the Chinese Cyber World: Case Studies from Weibo

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M. A. in International Studies

**PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN THE CHINESE CYBER WORLD:
CASE STUDIES FROM WEIBO**

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

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in
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this thesis project has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

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Abstract

This thesis discusses features of citizen communication on Weibo, the Chinese social media platform, and its relationship to participatory democracy in China. Weibo is a complex social space due to the interplay of different forces and social actors. On the one hand, Weibo provides the space for bottom-up political participation: it expands the horizontal discursive space where plural discourses coexist and interact; provides a social sphere where counter-discourses are created; a space where the culture of resistance is formed; and serves as an alternative source for information. On the other hand, the vertical political control of the state, and the digital divide produced by capitalist power, are forces that constrain citizen participation. The thesis examines the interplay of these dynamics in three online ethnographic case studies: the response to street vendor Xia Junfeng's death sentence, the sanitation workers' strike in Guangzhou, and the anti-trash incineration protest in Yuhang, and triangulates the results with an online survey and examination of the extant literature.

Keywords: Weibo; cyber democracy; social media, participation, China, social change

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the last decade, Internet users around the world have utilized social media platforms to express their political, social and cultural concerns. A wave of citizen-based social movements in places such as Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, Greece, Spain and North America, have utilized transnational social media platforms, developed in the U.S., such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, as part of their protest repertoires to achieve social, political and economic changes. However, in China, the Chinese government has blocked a list of “disharmonious” foreign online social media, including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. This move is deemed by many as extremely “undemocratic” and has caused frustration for numerous Chinese netizens. Meanwhile, this circumstance has also contributed to the boom of Chinese local social media platforms.

Social media websites have become a prevalent communication tool in China in recent years. Different types of social media platforms, such as Weibo, Q-zone, Renren, Douban and Wechat, cater to users of different genders, ages, educational background, and income levels. On the one hand, most of these social media platforms, which are products of private corporations, adopt the same operational “advertising model”, in order to expand markets and make profits, as do other prevalent U.S. social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google Plus, etc. On the other hand, the Chinese social media websites are localized, and carry their distinctive features in a specific Chinese political, social and cultural context. In this study, I focus on netizen activity on Sina Weibo, currently one of the most influential social media platforms in China.

Sina Weibo was launched by the Sina Corporation, one of the largest online media companies in China. The word *weibo* literally means “micro-blog” in Chinese. Launched in 2009, Sina Weibo has now grown into the largest micro-blogging platform in China, followed by

competing micro-blogging platforms, such as Tencent Weibo, Sohu Weibo and Netease Weibo. Currently, Sina Weibo has the largest number of active users and the greatest social impact of all the Chinese micro-blogging websites. It also affords the most engagement for discussions and debates of contemporary social and political issues. Moreover, it revised its logo from “Sina Weibo” to “Weibo” in April 2011 (M. Yang 2011), and replaced its old domain name “t.sina.com.cn” with “weibo.com” in March 2014 (X. Liu 2014), making itself the only legitimate “Weibo” in China. Therefore, when people speak of “Weibo”, they refer primarily to Sina Weibo. In this paper, I also use the term “Weibo” to refer to Sina Weibo.

Since its emergence, netizens’ use of Weibo has had an enormous impact on Chinese society. A great many social issues regarding corruption, land rights, the environment, food safety, and legal justice have prompted heated discussions, and Weibo has become an important new space for public discussion of social events and issues. A lot of the public discussions have directly affected the policy making of the Chinese authorities, while others have led to more complex reactions from the authorities and have produced other kinds of social impact.

Meanwhile, like many other online media platforms in China, Weibo communication is affected by the state’s Internet censorship. This unique political condition makes Weibo a more complex sphere for public discussion of social and political issues. On one hand, it has become a useful platform where a diversity of public opinions can be expressed and disseminated, which has created unprecedented possibilities for a “bottom-up” process of social change. On the other hand, it is has also been an effective tool for powerful individuals and institutions to create “top-down” influences. Different discourses and narratives have been created on this new dynamic “sphere”. At the same time, although there is tight state surveillance of Weibo, there have always been ways (both technological and non-technological) by which Weibo users could avoid and

“fight against” the state’s control. Thus Weibo has become a dynamic space for interaction and horizontal dialogue, between people with different opinions, and enabled more vertical encounters between the “grassroots” and the authorities and elites.

1.1. Research Questions

This study focuses on the relationship between Weibo participation, participatory democracy and social change in China. My research examines the following three sets of questions: 1) Which social actors use Weibo; and how do they use Weibo to express their concerns and discuss social and political issues? 2) How are messages disseminated on Weibo; and how does Weibo communication affect citizens’ activism and state policy making? 3) How does Weibo communication affect political participation and democracy in China; and what kinds of social, political and cultural impact has it produced?

1.2. Theoretical Frameworks

Classical and contemporary studies have established social theories regarding citizen communication and democracy, and have discussed notions such as the “public sphere” (Habermas 1974; 1989), the “discursive field” (Foucault 1972; 1977), the spheres of “counter-publics” (Fraser 1990), and “public connection” (Couldry & Livingstone & Markham 2007). In addition, a set of scholars have raised theories regarding citizen communication and democracy in a contemporary Chinese economic, political, social and cultural context (Esarey & Xiao 2011; Yuezhi Zhao 2001; 2007; 2010a; 2010b). Moreover, another set of scholars have focused on theories of the relation between the Web, citizen participation and democracy (Fuchs 2011; Castells 2001; 2011; 2012; Papacharissi 2009).

Previous studies have examined the role of Chinese Internet and social media, including Weibo. As I will explain in the next chapter, many scholars have focused on the Chinese state's operations on the Internet and social media (Tan & Foster & Goodman 1999; J. Liu 2013; X. Zhang & Lin 2014; King & Pan & Roberts 2013; Lu & Y. Qiu); some have examined the capacities of citizen empowerment of the Internet and social media in China (G. Yang & Calhoun 2007; Tong & Sparks 2009; Ip & Lam 2013; Kidd 2014; He 2008; Wallis 2011; Tong & Zuo 2014; Huang & Sun 2013; W. Wang 2013; Gu 2014; Rauchfleisch and Schäfer 2014); and others have focused on the coexistence and interplay of vertical and horizontal forces of Chinese social media platforms (J. Qiu 2014; P. Zhang 2013; Lewis 2013). Building on the previous literature, my study adopts online survey and online ethnography as the major research methods, and focuses on three specific cases, which I will elaborate in the following section.

1.3. Methodology

This research spanned seven months, from May 2014 to November 2014. Due to the specific feature of this study focusing on social relations in the cyber world, and with the feasible access to the Internet and Weibo that enabled me to conduct the research from a long distance, I spent the whole seven months in San Francisco Bay Area in the United States. More specifically, during the first five months through May to September, I focused on field data collection, archival research, and literature review and during the last two months from October to November, I primarily focused on data analysis and the final synthesis of the written work, as well as some complementary data collection and archival research.

The research included the following methods: first, online ethnography by using Weibo on a daily basis and interacting with people frequently, paying specific attention to the discussion

about three specific incidents; second, anonymous online questionnaires with netizens in China; third, content analysis and discourse analysis based on data collected from the previous two steps, and the comparison to the mainstream media; fourth, archival research on the relevant macro data, as well as historical, political, legal, social and cultural background of the evolution of cyber society, social media, and especially Weibo in China.

I started with online ethnography, using Weibo on a daily basis during the five-month data collection period from May 2014 to September 2014, participating in the online discussions about social and political issues, incidents and events, and observing users' behaviors and discussions on Weibo. I paid specific attention to three topics that were discussed by netizens online during my observation: the street vendor Xia Junfeng's death sentence, the sanitation workers' strike in Guangzhou and the anti-trash incineration protest in Yuhang. I examined user behaviors and discourses formed in the discussions, and collected certain posts and comments on Weibo, posted by different types of individuals who engaged in the discussions. The discussion about the Xia Junfeng Case mainly occurred in September 2013, which was earlier than my data collection period. However, because of the specific feature of the Internet social media that keep track of the activities and contents in the past, I was still able to conduct online ethnography, by collecting user information and posts of the past. The Yuhang anti-trash incineration protest took place in May 2014, and the sanitation workers' strike in Guangzhou took place in September 2014. During the Weibo discussions of these two cases, I participated and observed user activities and collected contents by "following" the participants, commenting and reposting their posts and recorded what I observed. I also collected news articles from mainstream media regarding the same issues for comparative analysis. These data all became material for my three case studies.

To further analyze the trending of certain topics, I utilized Weibo Data (data.weibo.com), Weibo's official data analyzing tool to examine the trend of certain key words, and the macro proportion of followers' age, gender, location, etc. I also used Weibo Events (vis.pku.edu.cn/weibova/weiboevents), the Weibo visual analytic system provided by Peking University, to generate distribution map of some posts on Weibo. Apart from ethnography, I also conducted content analysis and discourse analysis to help further analyze the data I collected from participant observation. These data enable me find out who use Weibo, how people use Weibo, how they discuss social issues, how Weibo discussion relates to off-line social issues, how Weibo discussion relates to democracy in China and what other symbolic meanings it creates. Most of the data collected from the field study was in Chinese, and was translated into English.

I also did questionnaires with people who have Internet access in China from May 2014 to July 2014. I used the Chinese online survey website Wenjuan (www.wenjuan.com) to conduct and distribute my questionnaires to participants. The website automatically displays either the PC or mobile version of the questionnaire, depending on which device a participant uses. It also generates a QR code; by scanning it using a smart phone, participants can conveniently access the questionnaire when they don't have the link on their device. I also shared the link and the QR code of the questionnaire to as many people as possible through popular Chinese online platforms such as microb-logs, social networking sites, instant messaging software and BBSs. Moreover, the survey website Wenjuan automatically converts quantitative responses into figures and visualized charts, which enabled me to grasp demographic information of the participants at any time during data collection, and therefore I was able to adjust the following recruiting process. I also used the data processing software SPSS to further analyze descriptive

data that cannot be processed by the survey website. As the samples of the survey research are netizens, and in other words, people who have the access to the Internet, this assures that my targeted respondents have the convenient access to my questionnaire. 565 effective questionnaires were collected through this method.

In the survey research, I collected data on three sections of questions: first, the habits of those using social media especially Weibo of Chinese netizens and the level of their engagement in discussions on social and political issues online; second, netizens' opinions on the role of Weibo and its relation to social change, especially "democracy" in the Chinese society; third, the demographic information of the respondents, such as age, gender, educational level, personal income level, family income level, etc. The first and the third sections mainly collected quantitative data and therefore more close-ended choice questions were designed in these two sections. The second section asked more open-ended questions and collected more qualitative data. These three sections of data help understand how people engage in social and political discussions on Weibo, how they utilize Weibo as a communication tool for social change, the relation between Weibo and people's daily life, the relation between social media communication and the Chinese society from the perspective of Chinese netizens.

Finally, I collected relevant archival data, utilizing official databases of relevant Chinese governmental and professional organizations such as the China Internet Network Information Center (CINIC), China Information Industry Network (CNII), Data Center of China Internet (DCCI), iResearch, Chinese academic databases such as National (Digital) Library of China (NLC), National Social Science Database (NSSD), China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), and Wanfang Dada, academic and professional online databases outside of China such as Fusion, ProQuest, Academic Search Complete, Project Muse, JSTOR, Elsevier, Alexa Internet,

as well as Gleeson Library at University of San Francisco, Anthropology Library and C. V. Starr East Asian Library at UC Berkeley. I also used information from official websites of Sina Corporation, and news articles from websites of mainstream mass media such as *People's Daily*, China News Service, *Southern Metropolis*, *Yangcheng Evening News*, and BBC. The archival study enables me to look into the macro data regarding use of Internet, social media and Weibo in China, as well as the historical, political, legal, social and cultural background of the evolvement of cyber society, social media, especially Weibo in China. It also enables me to conduct comparative discourse analysis between Weibo and mainstream mass media in and out of China.

1.4. Contribution

Building on theories of participatory democracy, citizen communication, and Internet and social media communication discussed by both western and Chinese scholars, the three sets of questions help us understand the features and roles of online social media in a specific contemporary Chinese economic, social, cultural and political context. Through three specific case studies which focus on Weibo communication regarding the situations of different social actors (street vendor, labors, and environmental protesters) in different circumstances, this study presents the features of three public spheres and examines the dynamics between different social forces being played on Weibo and the social impact it produces. It therefore sheds light on how the economic, social, political and cultural conditions affect use of Weibo, and how netizens' activity on Weibo interacts with the Chinese social structure and power relations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Participatory Democracy

2.1.1. Public Sphere, Discursive Field, Counter-publics and Public Connection

This section reviews social theories regarding citizen communication and participatory democracy, which lay the groundwork for our empirical study of cyber democracy of Weibo. Participatory democracy cannot be realized without the existence of the social realm, variously theorized by scholars as the “public sphere” (Habermas 1974; 1989), the “discursive field” (Foucault 1972; 1977), the spheres of “counter-publics” (Fraser 1990), or “public connection” (Couldry & Livingstone & Markham 2007). Habermas’ widely disseminated notion of the “public sphere” emphasized the “public” realm for rational political expressions. Using a poststructuralist framework, Foucault critiqued the Habermasian “public sphere” and raised the notion of “discursive field” which focuses on discursive relations. Fraser built on the Habermasian “public sphere” but argued that the singular concept failed to recognize the demands of subordinated social groups; and that Foucault lacked the acknowledgement of an alternative paradigm. Fraser then introduced the notion of “counter-publics”, which identifies multiple parallel counter-publics that enable the active participation and development of new knowledges and cultural and political claims of marginalized social groups. More recently, Couldry, Livingstone and Markham have critiqued earlier studies on the public sphere for their narrow focus on the theoretical, and have introduced empirical study of how the “public is practiced in relations within media platforms in daily life.

Habermas (1974; 1989), a second-generation Frankfurt school scholar, defined the “public sphere” as “a realm of social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed” (1974, p. 49). Habermas derived his notion of the public sphere from the practice of the

liberal bourgeois public sphere in theaters and coffee houses in late seventeenth century Western Europe, which he described as a “public sphere of civil society” (1989, p. 23). For Habermas, the “public sphere of civil society” is a positive social realm, in which people can set aside their private issues to freely express political ideas; and in the process of articulating public ideas, civil society challenges both the state and the capitalist market. Building on the earlier work of the Frankfurt school, Habermas resurrected the concept of the public sphere partly to demonstrate the enormous negative effect of the media cultural industries on democratic public debate. His conceptualization of the public sphere and ideal speech situations laid the groundwork for discussions about the relation between citizens’ communication and participatory democracy. However, as criticized by many scholars, the Habermasian idea of a unitary “public sphere” neglects the participation of un-propertied people, women, people with lower social and economic status, immigrants, and those outside Europe.

Foucault (1972; 1977) criticized the Habermasian notion of the public sphere in his poststructuralist framework of the relations between knowledge, power and space. Foucault described knowledge as socially constructed “discourses” that function to control and discipline the bodies of citizens. For Foucault, the notions of “public sphere”, “civil society” and “democracy” in modern societies serve as “a corpus of knowledge, techniques, [and] ‘scientific’ discourses” that are “formed and become entangled with the practice of power to punish” (1977, p. 23). Therefore, in a Foucauldian sense, the normative Habermasian public sphere and civil society produces another form of social control.

Foucault used the term “discursive field” (or “field of discourse”) to refer to the time and space that contain discursive events, the field that is “made up of the totality of all effective statements (whether spoken or written), in their dispersion as events, and in the occurrence that is

proper to them” (1972, p. 26-27). The discursive field thus produces and presents power and power relations between “institutions, economic and social processes, behavioral patterns, systems of norms, techniques, types of classification, modes of characterization” (p. 45). Foucault’s notion of “discursive field” looks deeper into the discursive power relations hidden by the illusion of “participation” on the surface.

Love (1989) compared Foucault and Habermas: “Foucault, fearing disciplined society, focuses on the constraining powers of democratic discourse. Habermas, fearing the end of individuality, emphasizes its enabling powers” (p. 270). Love synthesized the ideas of Habermas and Foucault, showing that rational communication “both enables and constrains” (p. 270), and suggested that we need to acknowledge both the “capacities” and “constraints” of power (p. 293). Therefore, we need to be fully aware of the dialectical relation between the enabling power and the constraining power that coexist and interact in the discursive realm. We will see how within the discourses of Weibo, as a platform constrained by the power of the state, corporations and individuals, there are also dynamic “enabling” and “disabling” forces.

Nancy Fraser (1989; 1990) built on the work of Habermas, and argued that the Habermasian singular notion of the “public sphere” was a bourgeois masculinist concept that fails to acknowledge the existence of “other, non-liberal, non-bourgeois, competing public spheres” (1990, p. 60-61) and thus increases inequality rather than reduces it. In addition, the consensus about the “public concern”, “public opinion”, “public good” or “common interest” (p. 58-59) neglects the unequal social structures generated by the basic institutional framework of a capitalist society (p. 66). Habermas’ ideal of rational discussion of public matters excludes the “private interest” of citizens (p. 59). Further, the notion of the public sphere is based on the

assumption of a sharp separation between the state and the civil society, which results in what Fraser called “weak publics” (p. 75).

Fraser also critiqued Foucault for his lack of acknowledgement of an alternative ethical paradigm to bring change (1989, p. 50). Fraser thus raised an alternative notion of “counter-publics” (or “counter-public spheres”): “Counter-publics contest the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech” (1990, p. 61). Fraser’s notion of “counter-publics” challenges Habermas’ notion of one singular public sphere, and instead posits that “subaltern counter-publics” and “parallel discursive arenas” are spaces where subordinate social groups form counter-discourses and create oppositional interpretations of their “identities, interests, and needs” (p. 67). There are competing publics such as “nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women’s publics, and working class publics” (p. 61). According to Fraser, in a society stratified by power relations, counter-publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than a single public sphere (p. 66). Further Fraser emphasized that subaltern counter-publics are not always virtuous, yet “expand the discursive space” and “complicate the issue of separatism” (p. 67). As introduced by Fraser, the subaltern counter-publics have a “dual characteristic”: “On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and re-groupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics” (p. 68). Fraser’s “counter-publics” thus critiques and complements Habermas’ “public sphere” and Foucault’s “discursive field”. It enables us to acknowledge diverse discursive spaces and the demands of different social groups, especially those with subordinate social status.

Further, Fraser emphasized the dynamisms and multiple dimensions of public arenas, in which social identities are constructed. In contrast to Habermas’ notion of the public sphere,

which overemphasized rational communication and neglected the cultural and emotional dimensions that play significant roles in social movements and citizens' communication, Fraser teased out the processes by which subaltern groups use communications to assist change and identity development, rather than presenting fully formed rational political ideas. Based on Fraser's notion of counter-publics, Sziarto and Leitner (2010) have examined the functions of emotions in the formation of counter-publics. Emotional expressions, according to Sziarto and Leitner, provide "affective grounds" for the construction of solidarity and collective identity within counter-publics (p. 386).

Social movement researchers, Goodwin and Jasper (2014) categorized emotions related to social movements:

"One category consists of reflexes, such as anger or surprise, that are quick to appear and to subside and which have clear bodily programs associated with them (Ekman 1972). Another group are long-standing affects, especially love and hate but also others such as trust and respect. There are, in addition, a number of moral emotions of approval and disapproval, including shame and pride, or sometimes sympathies such as compassion. Our final category, moods, does not take a direct object the way most emotions do; moods color our action, especially giving us more or less confidence, and we usually carry them with us from one setting to the next" (p. 618).

Goodwin and Jasper suggest that the emotions form "raw materials" which can be transformed into beliefs and actions (p. 620). Moreover, emotions are central to rationality rather than opposite to it (p. 352). In the study of participatory communication, we must also acknowledge the effects of emotions and the dialectical relation between emotions and rationality.

Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2007a; 2007b) indicated that most of the previous studies on the public sphere had been more theoretical than empirical (2007b, p. 1). Therefore, based on their conception of "mediated public connection", their empirical study, "the public connection project", examined how mediated public connection and media consumption are

practiced in daily life, through qualitative data collected from participants in the UK. They define “mediated public connection” as an “orientation” that citizens share to a public world where “matters of shared concern are, or at least should be, addressed”, and where public connection is primarily “sustained by a convergence in the media people consume” (2007a, p. 3). Their findings indicated that media encouraged civic engagement by increasing public discussion, but with “the almost complete absence of recorded links between talk and action” (p. 121). Further, media consumption is not the only basis of democracy. “Media consumption, along with demographics, trust, efficacy and social capital measures, contributes to public connection and political participation” (p. 170). Therefore, the mediated public connection, as they summarized, carried the following features,

“1) There is no single ideal type of mediated public connection but rather many individual forms along a broad spectrum: from ‘media world connectors’ – whose public orientation is driven principally by their practice as media consumers – to ‘public world connectors’ whose public orientation is driven principally by their sense of themselves as agents in a public world... 2) Mediated public connection, then, however important, cannot be taken as a given. It must be sustained by individuals and facilitated by the wider social, cultural and governmental context... 3) The dynamics of mediated public connection are complex, moving in more than one direction at once... 4) There may be further subtle dynamics that are undermining mediated public connection more broadly...” (p. 180-181)

According to Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, some of the factors that stabilize the mediated public connection are “work contexts, habits of news gathering, the value of keeping up with the news” (p. 181), while one primary factor that undermines it is celebrity culture (p. 182). Couldry, Livingstone and Markham’s “mediated public connection” emphasized the subjective roles of human beings as agents of social change. They acknowledged that, although media have a great influence on public connection, the most important factor in maintaining mediated public connection is people’s awareness that “if they follow the public world, that knowledge may contribute to their agency in that world, and that agency may in turn make a difference” (p. 194-

195). Media platforms are not inherently democratic or undemocratic; the more important factor in bringing change is the role of human beings and participatory culture.

2.1.2. Communication and Democracy in a Chinese Context

Yuezhi Zhao (2001; 2007; 2010a; 2010b) has shed light on the relationship between “democracy” and communication in a specifically Chinese social, cultural, political and historical context. She suggests that democracy has had different meanings at different times and places; the Chinese term for democracy, *minzhu*, also has multiple meanings which “range from populist and Marxist participatory concepts, to the Chinese Communist Party’s class-based ‘people’s democracy’ in which the formerly exploited classes are the basis of its power and whose welfare is of primary importance, to a liberal concept emphasizing individual rights” (2001, p. 22).

“[T]he words *min* and *zhu*, which together make the term *minzhu*, both have multiple meanings. *Min* can be either regarded as a corporate term within a populist discourse (the common folk, vis-à-vis officials, as in traditional Chinese discourse) or a class discourse (the people, vis-à-vis class enemies, as in Maoist discourse), or regarded as individual citizens in a liberal discourse. *Zhu* can either mean “master” — i.e., being in charge — or “primary”, in contrast to “secondary”, i.e., being taken as a priority by, “perhaps somebody who is in charge” (Guang 1996, p. 422)... [W]hile *minzhu* is a modern translation of the Western concept of democracy, the notion of *minben* (*ben* means “root”, “source”), or the common people as the sole source of state authority with their welfare as the state’s primary imperative, was well developed before the birth of Confucius in ancient China (Wang & Titunik 2000). This earlier concept excludes participation and denotes nothing more than a passive people and a benign ruler.” (p. 22)

The Maoist notion of democracy and political communication was “illiberal and antidemocratic in the representative and participatory sense”, since it “presumes the people as the source and sole concern of Party power”; it bears a similarity to the traditional notion of *minben* (p. 24). Following the bankruptcy of socialist democracy at the end of the 1970s, symbolized by

the end of the Cultural Revolution, there have been two big movements for democracy, the Democracy Wall Movement in 1978-1979 and the Tiananmen Square Movement in 1989. The notion of democracy (*minzhu*) during the Democracy Wall Movement period was diverse, with a mixture of Marxist socialist, liberal human rights and traditional *minben* perspective (p. 26-27). In 1989, after a decade of economic reforms and interactions with the capitalist West, the liberal human rights perspective of democracy became the predominant discourse among students and intellectuals, if not workers, while only a small number of intellectual elites still speak of socialist democracy (p. 28-30).

Zhao has critiqued the liberal perspective that capitalist media marketization would result in democracy in China. According to her, Habermas' notion of the public sphere has become "a stereotype in the imagination of liberal intellectuals about 'democracy'" (2010a, p. 26). "Liberalism, not democracy, was perhaps the more appropriate term to describe the main thrust of the democracy claims in 1989" (2001, p. 29). Instead of a "capitalist liberal democracy" (2010a, p. 22), democracy in China should be tied more closely to the concept of "people's democracy" (2010b, p. 544) emphasizing an alliance with the peasants and working class. During Mao's era, communication in China emphasized the "subjectivity of the workers and peasants" (2010a, p. 15). Since the capitalist marketization in the 1980s, peasant and worker groups have been systemically silenced and marginalized in the capitalist economy, where they have far less social, cultural, economic and political power. The polarization of Chinese society as a result of marketization, however, was exacerbated by two major social changes in the 1990s — the massive lay-off of employees of state enterprises and the movement of former peasant "migrant workers" (*nongmin gong*) from the countryside to the cities (p. 9). Media marketization has therefore tended to target the growing middle class and upper class, with their far greater

disposable income for consumer goods; and has resulted in the mainstream media's presentation of the grassroots as "objects" and "others" (p. 11). Peasants and workers are therefore excluded from the public sphere (p. 27). As capitalist "modernization" becomes a prevalent ideology, even peasants have begun to regard themselves and rural society as "backward" (p. 15).

China's current "digital revolution" is a "digital leap forward", a performance of Chinese military-led techno-nationalism in the post-Mao era (2007, p. 97). The promotion of ICTs has created a "digital divide" and has led to a "fragmented, polarized, and deeply divided" Chinese society (p. 101), increasing the struggles of the lower classes, especially the industrial workers and farmers (p. 104-109). As I argue in this thesis, the digital divide and fragmentation is however only one dimension of the Internet in China, while on the other side, the new technologies have also shown potential for lowering the cost of citizen communication and expanding the space for the active participation of millions of citizens, including those from lower social classes.

In all, Zhao has argued that democracy in China cannot be realized without the empowerment of China's lower social classes, typically the peasants who live in inland areas of China, the older urban working class and the current generation of newly urbanized migrant workers. Thus it is crucial to take into consideration the "injustice and inequalities of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'" (2010b, p. 549). She points out that Chinese peasants and workers have a long tradition of resistance and unrest, although often downgraded by the mainstream media in a depoliticized language of "mass events" (p. 549). Her theorization about media and democracy in China is helpful for its analysis and understanding of the class features of commercial social media platforms in China; it cautions us to examine the question of whose

“participation”, before hastily concluding that there is increasing democracy in China with the simplistic illusion that there is seemingly more “participation”.

Esarey and Xiao (2011) have provided us with some historical background of the transformation of communication in China, and shown the importance of cyberspace as a place of “counter-publics” in the democratization of Chinese society. They argued that the information revolution in China has changed the relationship between the state and societal actors (p. 298). They divide China’s information regime into three historical periods of transformation: the Soviet-style propaganda state from 1949 to 1978, the commercialization of the media from 1979 to 2002, and the digital age from 2003 to the present (p. 305). During the first period, the mass media served as the “mouthpiece” of the party. The second transformation started during the transformation towards the market economy; the commercialization of the media decentralized the political control of the party. However, the state created new institutions to monitor the commercialized and proliferated media (p. 302). “The state’s power to influence public opinion through the commercial media actually increased over time, as the reach of mass media grew” (p. 303).

The third transformation of the digital age, starting in the early 2000s, has, according to Esarey and Xiao, brought about “citizen empowerment” (p. 303-304) of Chinese society. Since the beginning of the digital age, large online protest movements called “mass Internet incidents” have emerged. According to their comparative content analysis of newspaper articles and blog posts, there is significantly less propaganda and more criticism of the government in the blogosphere (p. 312). In addition, postings mentioning terms such as “democracy”, “freedom of speech”, “rights”, and “political reform” significantly increased from 2004 to 2010 (p. 310-312). Moreover, Chinese netizens are becoming savvy at expressing their views by using political

satire, spoofing, and ironic uses of language (p. 300). While the party state's control of media expression continues, and the specific mechanisms of control change over time, the force of resistance which Castells calls "counter-power" (2011, p. 778) exists in a long historical line going back throughout Chinese history.

Esarey and Xiao view the free market in China as a mechanism of citizen empowerment; in contrast, Yuezhi Zhao regards it as a mechanism of expanding inequality. I hold that the media marketization in China, particularly the emergence of the Internet, has both produced unequal power relations and a degree of citizen empowerment. Meanwhile, it has also brought both centralization and decentralization of the Chinese state power. Our study builds on these theories and examines the role of contemporary social media platforms.

2.2. Democracy, the Web and Social Media

2.2.1. Defining Web 2.0 and Social Media

European scholar Christian Fuchs (2011) has suggested that the concepts of Web 1.0, 2.0 and 3.0 are based on three dimensions of human society: cognition, communication and cooperation, which he has drawn from the social theories of Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies and Karl Marx:

"Cognition is the activity of the human mind. Cognition is social for Durkheim because it is permanently confronted with social facts and is the foundation for creating and recreating social facts. Communication is a process in which signs and symbols are given a certain meaning by a person or group of persons who share those meanings among themselves and with others who also give certain meanings to these signs and symbols. The notion of communication relates to Weber's concept of social action and stresses the role of meaning, signs, and symbols. Communication, in other words, is social action that makes use of symbols. Cooperation is a process in which several humans act together in order to achieve a goal or a process of joint actions that produces a shared consciousness of belonging together. If cooperation is understood in this way, then it expresses Marx's notion of cooperation and Tönnies' concept of community" (p. 202).

Based on this framework, Fuchs therefore defined: “Web 1.0 is a computer-based networked system of human cognition, Web 2.0 is a computer-based networked system of human communication, [and] Web 3.0, is a computer-based networked system of cooperation” (p. 202). According to Fuchs, we are now in the era of Web 2.0 and are moving toward the era of Web 3.0.

European professors of marketing, Kaplan and Haenlein, (2010) define social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (p. 61). According to this definition, Cox (2013) explained that social media includes a wide range of platforms such as social networking (Facebook, LinkedIn, Ning), micro-blogging (Twitter, Tumblr), smartphones, wikis, vlogs, social news sites (Digg, Reddit), YouTube, location-based services (MyTown, Gowalla), and others (p. 183). The following section further explores theories regarding the relationship between the changing social structures and the Web, specifically social media platforms and their potential to bring democratic communication.

2.2.2. The Web and Democracy

For Fuchs, the “participatory web” has become an ideology that is largely constrained by the commodification of the Internet. Based on Marx’s theories, Fuchs points out that most websites today are “profit oriented” and “advertising supported” (2011, p. 211). He described the class division feature of the Web: “Web 2.0 / 3.0 does not extend democracy beyond the political sphere into culture and economy. Nor does it maximize the developmental powers of human beings. Instead, it mainly maximizes the developmental powers of an economic class that owns web platforms and holds the extractive power to dispossess users and exploit powers of participatory democracy theory” (p. 213). Therefore, according to Fuchs, the Web not only

increases exploitation of the free labor of its users but also expands surveillance under the mask of a “democracy” discourse. It is brilliant to point out the ideological aspect of the Web. Most websites working today, including social media networks like Weibo, are making profits by adopting the advertising model. The corporate domination is one considerable dimension of the Web that we need to take into account. Fuchs’ theory helps us understand that social media networks are not fully neutral platforms for social participation because their architecture is built on the unequal power relations of the capitalist mode of production.

Manuel Castells (2001; 2011; 2012) introduced a theory of contemporary power relations that he calls the “network society”. Castells held that in the network society, power is chiefly exercised through networks and is multidimensional (2011, p. 774). This means that each actor in the network has some power, but none of them has all the power (p. 776). Each power is necessarily accompanied by a counter-power, and these different forces construct the network through their interactions (p. 778). The creation of the Internet, Web 2.0, and Web 3.0 has produced what Castells calls the “commodification of freedom” which means “enclosing the commons of free communication and selling people access to global communication networks in exchange for surrendering their privacy and becoming advertising targets” (p. 782). However, when entering into cyberspace, netizens are empowered in some ways and are able to challenge corporate power, and government authority, and to change culture (p. 782). Therefore, according to Castells, although social media platforms are operated by corporations and affected by state policies, they still potentially empower the people who use it. This theory of multidimensional network power contrasts with Fuchs’ theory, which emphasized more of the constraining forces of corporate power over the Internet.

Moreover, Castells describes the historical development of the Internet as a “culture of freedom” (2012, p. 231).

“It was deliberately designed by scientists and hackers as a decentered, computer communication network able to withstand control from any command center. It emerged from the culture of freedom prevailing in the university campuses in the 1970s (Markoff 2006). It was based on open source protocols from its inception, the TCP /IP protocols developed by Vint Cerf and Robert Kahn. It became user friendly on a large scale thanks to the World Wide Web, another open source program created by Tim Berners-Lee. In continuity with this emphasis on autonomy building, the deepest social transformation of the Internet came in the first decade of the twenty-first century, from the shift from individual and corporate interaction on the Internet (the use of email, for instance), to the autonomous construction of social networks controlled and guided by their users. It came from improvements in broadband, and in social software and from the rise of a wide range of distribution systems feeding the Internet networks. Furthermore, wireless communication connects devices, data, people, organizations, everything, with the cloud emerging as the repository of widespread social networking, as a web of communication laid over everything and everybody” (p. 231).

Castells thus indicated that the Internet plays an important role in creating new political dynamics, which he called “informational politics” (2001, p. 156). According to Castells, the Internet serves as a “horizontal, non-controlled, relatively cheap, channel of communication, from one-to-one as well as from one-to-many” (p. 157), which enables what he called “mass self-communication”, the interactive and multidirectional communication exercised through horizontal networks like the Internet and other digital platforms (p. 779). Social power, especially of those in the network society, operates by constructing meaning in networks through the process of communication, including “mass self-communication” (p. 779). In social movements, networked individuals are triggered by emotions and transformed into collective actors through communicative actions within networks (2012, p. 210). In addition, Castells showed that the more frequently people use the Internet, the more autonomous they become (p. 233). Furthermore, the use of the Internet makes government affairs more visible to citizens and therefore it strengthens democracy (2001, p. 156-158). Castells’ new model of social theory of

the network society helps us understand the power relations in the information age and analyze the multidimensional and complex power relations of social media.

U.S. communications professor Zizi Papacharissi (2009) reexamined the notions of the public sphere and cyber democracy in a contemporary social, cultural, political and economic context. Papacharissi distinguished between the notions of public sphere and public space. She believed that online media creates public space, but not necessarily a public sphere. “A new public space is not synonymous with a new public sphere, in that a virtual space simply enhances discussion; a virtual sphere should enhance democracy. Similarly, given the nature of online deliberations, it would not be appropriate to even use the term “virtual commons”; the technologies at hand generate common space, but do not constitute ‘commons’” (p. 12). According to Papacharissi, access to information, reciprocity of communication and commercialization are currently three primary factors that prevent the transition from public space to the public sphere (p. 12).

Papacharissi argued that, although the Internet has little to do with the Habermasian notion of public sphere, it does have the potential for democracy. In postmodern culture, according to her, it is the self-centered and self-directed expressions that often lead to collective actions. The self-centered values of the Internet, which focus on a strong desire to control one’s environment and the desire for autonomy, is distinct from the public sphere, which emphasizes public “accord” and “commons” (p. 12-16). In addition, citizens use the Internet to express their opinions, while politicians and elites also make use of online media to maintain their own agendas. The Internet thus enables pluralist and agonistic expressions of dissent, and therefore it enhances democracy but does not enhance the Habermasian public sphere (p. 16-21).

Furthermore, Papacharissi suggested that online spaces promote a hybrid of commercial and civic interests. “These commercially public spaces may not render a public sphere, but they provide spaces where individuals can engage in healthy democratic practices, including keeping a check on politicians, engaging in political satire, and expressing / circulating political opinions” (p. 23). Therefore, according to Papacharissi, online spaces do not provide a public sphere or private sphere, but the overlap of both: “online technologies possess ‘reflexive’ architecture, responsive to the needs of multiple private spheres, which would be isolated were it not for the connectivity capabilities of online media” (p. 25).

In my study of Weibo, I build on these western theories to explore whether the Web, specifically social media, has increased democracy through what Castells identifies as the “mass self-communication”, whether cyber democracy is constrained by economic factors, as Fuchs suggests, and what are the forces that enhance and undermine democratic communication on social media. By combining and using these different theories in my study, it is also important to put them into a specific contemporary Chinese political, historical and social context.

2.2.3. The Role of the Internet in China

Among the numerous scholarly studies about the Chinese Internet, one set focus on governmental control and regulation. Tan, Foster and Goodman (1999) described China’s “state-coordinated” Internet infrastructure, and hold that, even though the Chinese government allows a certain degree of competition and decentralized decision making for the goal of economic development, the state’s Internet infrastructure is never beyond the control of the government (p. 44-52). Jun Liu (2013) pointed out that the mobile phone has become a “weapon of resistance” and “weapon against authoritarian rule and censorship” (p. 996), while “cyber exclusion” (p.

1016) prevents the Internet from being a communication tool for democracy, and the Internet has become a part of the “new authoritarianism” (p. 999) due to the state’s mechanisms of tightened censorship.

Many other scholars, however, have found that the Internet plays positive roles in Chinese society. Guobin Yang and Calhoun (2007) examined the relation between the Internet and environmental activism, indicating that the Internet plays an essential role in influencing China’s “green sphere” (p. 220). Tong and Sparks (2009) believed that the Internet does serve as an important source for investigative journalism, especially when other forms of media are controlled tightly by the party (p. 345). Ip and Lam (2013) analyzed the characteristics of feminist public sphere and counter-publics in China in the information age, and indicated that the authority today faces “a series of legitimacy crises” due to the fast growing feminist counter-public spheres with the emergence of the Internet (p. 254). Kidd (2014) described the resistance of Chinese young migrant workers who work for transnational corporations; although they face serious domestic political constraints and global capitalism (p. 223), the young Chinese working class make use of digital tools such as mobile phones and the Internet, to organize and promote their strikes and campaigns and create solidarities, and also to express themselves and build their subjectivities and identities (p. 219).

He (2008) described the coexistence of two distinct “discourse universes” in China, between communist ideologies and capitalist realities: the official universe, which “occupies all the public space of expression” and is “characterized by vagueness, abstractness, ambiguity, and indoctrination” (p. 182); and the private universe, which is “characterized by non-hegemonic expressions ranging from radical nationalism to liberalism, materialism, and extreme cynicism” and “survives primarily in the oral sphere” (p. 182). The emergence and advancement of the

Internet and SMS (short message services) have extended the boundaries of the nonofficial universe (p. 182). He's private discourse universe creates the possibility for the existence of Fraser's counter-publics or Papacharissi's multiple private spheres in the Chinese context. Our study further examines whether Weibo has expanded He's concept of the "private universe".

Wallis (2011) examined the dynamics of Chinese new media, including telecommunications, mobile phones and the Internet, adopting a cultural approach. Wallis indicated that the Internet has created public "discussion, dissemination and mobilization" (p. 419) among Chinese netizens. Despite the state's crackdown on the Internet, users have been using both technological solutions and creative non-technological methods such as encoded language (p. 422); and the new technologies have provided a space for polyphonic expressions (p. 422). They have created new identities, communities and lifestyles, and therefore have been constitutive of individual, social and political changes in China (p. 427).

Jack Qiu (2013; 2014; J. Qiu et al. 2014) has critiqued the participatory paradigm in the field of communication, which puts emphasis on the "conventional, elitist, modernization" paradigm and techno-determinism (J. Qiu 2014, p. 382). Qiu indicated that top-down social control and bottom-up participation co-exist on the Chinese web.

"[D]oes participation really empower small potatoes, or is it helping Big Brother? Social control, from the panopticon to the panspectron (Braman, 2006), is another classic theme in political and cultural theory that should inform our dialogue. It applies well in the Chinese context, where the combination of the world's largest Internet user population and one of the fastest growing social media markets is not accompanied by the flattening of political structures. The stronghold against the labor movement in China has not been weakened by the spread of Weibo, China's most popular Twitter-like service, which has attracted labor activists, NGOs, and some ordinary workers. Instead, the structures of control seem to have gained from the new wealth of user-generated content, which benefits the powers that be more than anyone else" (J. Qiu et al. 2014, p. 1133).

Therefore Qiu emphasized that communication studies should not only focus on the technology but also the power structure. He described cyberspace as a “new lab” for bottom-up participatory experiments, and each social movement as a “test tub”, for “digitally networked action” or DNA (p. 1143). “Most experiments fail, but that’s what experiments do. But that’s okay, because you only need one test to host the experiment that changes the world” (p. 1144). “ICTs are not always required to bring about change. What ultimately matters is the people, not the technologies” (J. Qiu 2014, p. 388).

Like Yuezhi Zhao, Qiu emphasizes class inequality in the discussion of cyber democracy. He introduced the notion of “working-class ICT”, which refers to “a range of technological devices and services, often operated by micro-entrepreneurs and their employees, that serve members of the lower class—that is, the information have-less” (2013, p. 123). He indicated that cybercafés (p. 123) and mobile phones (J. Qiu 2014, p. 376) both serve the “working-class ICT” in China. According to Qiu, cybercafés (*wangba*, net-bars) that emerged in the 1990s as “elite places of education, enlightenment and global connectivity” (2013, p. 123) have now become the “working-class ICT”. Although stigmatized as the culprits of Internet addiction and moral decay and thus facing crackdown from the authorities (p. 134), cybercafés have emerged as small-scaled and community-based businesses in “working-class communities, small towns and rural areas” throughout China, and provide basic access to the Internet for the lower social classes, generate jobs for community members (p. 129), and also build new communities for the youth (p. 132). Therefore Qiu has suggested that the cybercafé be considered as a “‘commons’ for the ‘information have-less’” in China (p. 137).

2.2.4. Chinese Social Media and Weibo

Another set of scholarly studies have focused on the role of social media such as the micro-blog or Weibo in China. Some scholars have raised the limitations of Chinese social media. Xinzhi Zhang and Lin (2014) hold that social media in China are platforms to maintain the state's legacy, for most of the new media-facilitated offline political actions tend to be pro-state rather than democratic (p. 34). King, Pan and Roberts (2013) focused on the state's censorship and found out that on Chinese social media, negative criticisms are allowed while posts and comments associated with mobilization and collective actions are more likely to be censored. Lu and Yunxi Qiu (2013) argued that micro-blogging in China has created great social and political fragmentation and networked violence, resulting from post-modern individualistic practices and the state's tight control (p. 326).

Some others have emphasized the positive capacities of Chinese online social media. Tong and Zuo's (2014) study showed that Weibo serves as a platform for the expression of protesters as well as the communication of other Internet users (p. 80). Huang and Sun (2013) indicated that Chinese Weibo networks are platforms that foster collective action for homeowners, for it "fosters public online issue-networks beyond geographical boundaries" (p. 86). Wilfred Wang (2013) examined competing discourses on Weibo discussions, and indicated that instead of forming a public consensus, users engage in ongoing deliberative dialogues (p. 384). Gu (2014) examined Weibo's role in bridging communication between citizens and the state, and believed that micro-bloggers are autonomous "subjects of communication" rather than objects of surveillance (p. 82).

Some scholars have highlighted the coexistence of limitations and the positive capacities of social media in China. Pengyi Zhang (2013) indicated that Weibo both includes and excludes

the lower social classes. On the one hand, it expands the opportunity for their social networking, expression and mobilization (p. 77), while on the other hand, it also “deepens” the digital divide (p. 78). Lewis (2013) pointed out that new media in China have both democratic and non-democratic features (p. 697), and have “expanded interaction both horizontally amongst citizens and vertically between state and society” (p. 697-698).

Rauchfleisch and Schäfer (2014) argued that censorship is apparent on Sina Weibo; nevertheless it does not completely shut down public debates (p. 1). They held that netizens in China adapt to the control and censorship online and sometimes circumvent censorship (p. 2). Weibo is neither apolitical nor a fully government- controlled space, as some scholars have suggested (p. 5). Instead, they argued that communication on Weibo fulfills the three main criteria of public spheres: openness, longevity and participation (p. 2).

Rauchfleisch and Schäfer identified seven types of public spheres that exist on Sina Weibo: 1) thematic public spheres, such as “green” or “environmental” public sphere (Yang & Calhoun 2007), climate change public sphere and food safety public sphere; 2) short-term public spheres, especially those that only exist for a short time before government censorship; 3) encoded public spheres, where morphed, homophonous words or visualizations are used; 4) local public spheres which discuss local issues, events and incidents; 5) non-domestic political public spheres, discussions about international political events and situations; 6) mobile public spheres; 7) meta public spheres (p. 6-12). In “authoritarian countries” like China, online media such as Weibo are more likely to provide an alternative forum for public debate, for the mass media is more heavily censored by the government (p. 3). Moreover, Rauchfleisch and Schäfer also mentioned that on Weibo, censorship is visible to audiences, which is different from traditional

mass media, because the content on traditional media is checked before being published, while the content on Weibo is deleted after already being exposed to the audience online (p. 12).

As I have shown, previous studies in the field of Chinese Internet and social media have focused on the Chinese state's operations, the capacities of citizen empowerment, or the coexistence and interplay of vertical and horizontal forces. So far, most of the studies have used massive data from the macro level, typically by conducting surveys, content analysis or discourse analysis. Few, however, have collected descriptive data, which would examine the social media communication from a micro level. My study, therefore, adopts ethnography as the major methodology, and focuses on specific cases with different circumstances, to examine how netizens use Weibo to influence the state's policy making and produce social impacts. This will provide new perspectives for the study of social media in China.

Chapter 3: Overview: The Internet in China

Since the implementation of the “Reform and Opening” policy in the late 1970s, which opened China’s market to the capitalist world, the Chinese government has emphasized economic development and modernization. Since then, China has gone through a rapid process of urbanization, capitalist marketization, globalization, informatization and a degree of media liberalization (Wallis 2011, p. 407). The Chinese government has devoted considerable resources to expanding the use and scope of the Internet. Currently, China has the largest number of Internet users in the world. According to the China Internet Network Information Center, the Internet user number and the Internet penetration rate have been steadily increasing in recent years (Figure 1) (2014b, p. 10). In June 2014, the number of China’s Internet users reached 632 million, the Internet penetration rate reached 46.9%, and the number of websites in China reached 2.73 million (p. 23).

However, there remain major digital divides, especially those relating to urban-rural, age, and gender differences. Educational and income levels are not the main factors explaining the gap. The majority (71.8%) of Internet users are from urban areas with 28.2% (178 million users) from rural areas. Of all Internet users, males (55.6%) outnumber females (44.4%). The majority tend to be younger; with those aged 10-39 making up 78.6% of all the Internet users (Figure 2). 67.2% of Internet users in China have junior school or high school educational levels (Figure 3). 86.7% of netizens have monthly income of less than 5000 Yuan (814 USD) and 67.8% have less than 3000 Yuan (489 USD) (Figure 4) (p. 4-5).

Since the second half of 2011, the use of mobile phones for Internet access has been steadily increasing. Mobile phone Internet users rose to 527 million in June 2014, making up 83.4% of all Internet users in China (2012a; 2012b; 2013a; 2013b; 2014a; 2014b). Chinese

Internet users' average weekly time on the Internet has also been continuously increasing since the second half of 2011 and reached 25.9 hours in June 2014 (2014b, p. 19). As of 2014, the majority of netizens use the Internet at home (91.3%), followed by the workplace (32.4%), cybercafés (18.8%), public places (15.4%) and schools (13.8%) (p. 18). The top activities that Chinese Internet users engage in are instant messaging (89.3%), search engine (80.3%), reading news (79.6%), listening to music (77.2%), blog / personal space (70.3%), watching videos (69.4%), online games (58.2%), online shopping (52.5%), online payment (46.2%), reading literatures (45.8%) and micro-blogging (43.6%) (p. 26).

Although the Chinese government has put a major emphasis on the construction of Internet infrastructure and the advancement of related technologies, it also fears the “harmful” effects created by these technologies. Since 2000, the Chinese government has enacted laws and regulations on Internet use. Websites and contents regarded as “unlawful” or “unhealthy” have been banned. The censorship intensified between 2008 and 2010, as “thousands of websites, both foreign and domestic, were shut down for having ‘pornography’ or ‘vulgarity’” (Wallis 2011, p. 407). In order to filter information online, the Chinese government has taken multiple measures. According to Esarey and Xiao,

“Thousands of government employees disguise their real identities and post anonymous commentary online to guide public opinion toward positions favored by the CCP leadership (Bandurski, 2008). The state has attempted to register the real names of users of BBS Web sites and major Web portals, and it has required the installation of software on computers at schools and Internet bars around the country to prevent access to Web sites with politically sensitive, religious, and pornographic material. A central governmental attempt to require the installation of “Green Dam Youth Escort” software to restrict access to “unhealthy” Web sites for all computers sold in China was, however, called off in the face of criticism by China’s netizens, international businesses, and the U. S. government (Office of the United States Trade Representative 2009; Yang 2009b).” (2011, p. 299)

In spite of this, technological solutions such as Virtual Private Network (VPN), anonymizing tools and software that can change the direction of texts, and non-technological methods such as “tomb digging”, “digging up” earlier posts and adding comments, or encoded languages are adopted by numerous netizens to avoid being censored (Wallis 2010, p. 422).

The state’s control mechanisms have not stopped all netizens from expressing their opinions online. According to Esarey and Xiao, 66% of Chinese Internet users “have expressed their views on upwards of one million Web forums”, and 60% of Chinese netizens reported they “have used the Internet to express opinions intended to ‘supervise’ government activities” (2011, p. 299). The Internet is playing an increasingly important role in influencing social issues and public events. According to Yu, the number of “online public opinion events” (*wangluo yuqing shijian*) rose from 248 in 2009 to 274 in 2010 and 349 in 2011 (2012). Among the “public opinion events” (*yuqing shijian*) in 2010, 46.3% started from the Internet and 12.7% from micro-blog platforms (2011, p. 25-26).

Chinese netizens have long been using the Internet for information sharing and opinion exchange. Before the emergence of Social Network Sites (SNS) and micro-blogs, Chinese Internet users used BBSs (Bulletin Board System), which first emerged in China in the mid and late 1990s, and blogs, which went online in China in 2002 (Wallis 2011, p. 413). According to Gov.cn, the Chinese government’s official portal site, “[t]here are over a million BBSs and some 220 million bloggers. According to a sample survey, each day people post over three million messages via BBSs, news commentary sites, blogs, etc., and over 66% of Chinese netizens frequently place postings to discuss various topics, and to fully express their opinions and represent their interests” (2010). Following BBSs and blogs, the first Chinese Social Network Site (SNS) Xiaonei, which was identified as a Chinese version of “Facebook”, was launched in

2005 by university students. The emergence of Social Network Sites has enabled young people to “manage their identity and sociality both online and off” (Wallis 2010, p. 414).

3.1. Micro-Blogging in China

The first micro-blog platform in China was Fanfou, launched in 2007. In late 2009, micro-blogging started expanding rapidly in China with the emergence of several leading micro-blogging platforms, such as Sina, Tencent, Sohu, and Netease (Lu & Y. Qiu 2013, p. 307). After a rapid developing period in 2011 and 2012, micro-blogging has now entered into a mature growing period (Figure 5) (China Internet Network Information Center 2011a; 2011b; 2012a; 2012b; 2013a; 2013b; 2014a; 2014b). The number of micro-blog users reached 275 million in June 2014, making up 43.6% of all Internet users in China, among whom 189 million (68.7% of all micro-blog users) were mobile phone micro-blog users (2014b, p. 35). Sina Weibo has the most users (87.67%) of all micro-blogging platforms, followed by Tencent Weibo (84.69%), Netease Weibo (56.12%) and Sohu Weibo (35.63%).

The majority of micro-blog users are male (57.4%), younger (80.92% are 10-39), with lower education (74.88% with high school level or less), lower income (92.2% have monthly income under 5000 Yuan (814 USD)), and are located in the Eastern part of China (52.3%) primarily in urban areas. This skew is because the majority of micro-blog users are young students or those who have just graduated and started working (Data Center of China Internet 2012; Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Institute of Journalism and Communication 2013).

The majority of micro-bloggers use micro-blogs quite frequently (Figure 6) (iResearch 2014). The most frequently used functions of micro-blogs are commenting (69.8%), following (60.9%), hot topics (57.2%) and reposting (39.7%). Friends (55.6%), experts (46.0%), celebrities

(45.7%), favorite people (35.6%), stars and idols (35.3%), and media institutions (35.0%) are followed most by micro-blog users (Data Center of China Internet 2010). A lot of micro-bloggers frequently engage in political and social discussions online. Public welfare (66.9%), political affairs (59%), and entertainment (55%) are the three leading topics discussed on micro-blogs. Micro-blogs also serve as important platforms for self-presentation and public expression. Most users use micro-blogs for expressing emotion (74.3%), recording life (59%), and sharing information and opinion (55.7%). Micro-blogs also serve as reliable platforms for news sources. More than 60% people trust the information on micro-blogging, of whom 50.7% indicate that micro-blogs are credible and 10.5% find them very credible (Xiao 2011) (Lu & Y. Qiu 2013, p. 308). In addition, micro-blogs have become the third largest source of news (12.7%) in China, following local newspapers (32.3%) and BBSs (20%) (Yu 2011).

While micro-blogs have become spaces for the public to express and exchange opinions, the state has also utilized micro-blogs to expand its influence and reduce the “negative” effects of micro-blogs. First, government institutions, party branches and individual government officials have created micro-blog accounts. In June 2014, the number of verified official “public affairs accounts” (*zhengwu weibo*) on Sina Weibo reached 119,169, among which 84,377 were official Weibo accounts of government institutions, and 34,792 were accounts of individual government officials (People’s Daily Online Media Opinion Monitoring Office 2014, p. 20). However, as Lu and Y. Qiu indicated, these accounts have little influence, for most of them only have 100,000 to 500,000 followers and only 16 have more than one million followers (Lu & Y. Qiu 2013, p. 314). Second, corporate-run micro-blog platforms also have to cooperate with the government in Internet censorship. Some “sensitive” posts are deleted. Those who are accused of spreading “rumors” or posting “disharmonious” contents, especially opinion leaders, are arrested

or “educated” by the police, as what netizens often describe as “check the water meter” (*cha shuibiao*) or “invite for tea” (*qing hecha*), which means the authorities visit people by pretending to be the water meter checker or to invite them for tea. Third, the government also employs thousands of employees to create zombie accounts on micro-blogs, which are often identified as the water army (*shuijun*) or fifty-cent party (*wumao dang*) by netizens, to post and comment in order to expand “positive energy” (*zheng nengliang*, “positive” influence) on micro-blogging platforms. However, as this study will show, these moves of the state authority have not stopped all public discussions and citizen activism online. Moreover, the government efforts have contributed to an increase in dialogues and interactions.

3.2. Sina Weibo

Run by Sina Corporation, Sina.com is one of the four leading portal sites (Sina, Tencent, Sohu and Netease) in China. Launched in 1998, Sina was listed on the NASDAQ stock market in 2000. In 2005, Sina launched its blog platform Sina Blog, which became the most popular blog service platform in China, with the most famous bloggers, such as Xu Jinglei and Han Han, opening their blogs on Sina. Sina Weibo was launched in August 2009, one month after Facebook and Twitter were blocked in China. Sina Weibo is currently the social media with the largest number of registered users and the most active social media in China (People 2014). As Sina claimed, its registered Weibo user number reached 540 million in December 2013 (G. Zhao & Song 2013). Its monthly active user reached 156.5 million and daily active user reached 69.7 million in August 2014 (Y. Chen 2014). As of August 2014, its popularity ranks the 5th among websites in China and 16th among global websites (Alexa 2014).

The Chinese character *wei* means “tiny” or “micro” and *bo* means “knowledgeable” or “plentiful”. *Bo* is also short for *boke* which is a loanword from the English word “blog”. Therefore, the word *weibo* literally means “micro-blog” in Chinese. *Weibo* is also a homophone for “scarf”. Therefore since the prevalence of micro-blogs, especially Sina Weibo, people have been using the phrase “weaving a scarf” (*zhi weibo*) to refer to creating and updating one’s Weibo page. The Chinese word “*weibo*” now has multiple meanings. It can either refer to the micro-blogging platform, one’s Weibo account, or one piece of a post on the Weibo platform.

On the web version of Weibo, every user has an entry to the “personal page” (Figure 7) where their profiles and posts (tweets) are displayed and a “home page” where they can check the newsfeed and hot topics. Users can upload a profile picture and can change the background picture of the personal page. On the current version, the profile picture is placed on the top left side of the personal page. Under the profile picture is the following, follower and Weibo post number of a user. The word *fensi* originally meant “silk noodles”. It is also cyber-language for “fans” due to its similar pronunciation as the English word. The user’s nickname is placed on the right side of the profile picture (Figure 7).

Real names are not required but are encouraged. People who submit their ID cards, or companies and organizations who submit their certificates online, can apply for a “verified user” with a letter “v” beside the nickname. The real name and the title of a person or organization will be displayed on the right top side of the personal page. The letter “v” can increase one’s credibility and increase fans numbers and personal influence, and therefore celebrities, companies and organizations and those who favor public exposure and fame are willing to apply for a “v” on their account. However, real name verification also increases the possibility of direct surveillance on users. Other personal information such as location, gender, birthday, relationship

status, short introduction, contact information, educational information, and career information can be filled out and shown on the “profile” section on the top of the personal page, but these items are not required (Figure 7).

The design of the Weibo webpages is a combination of Facebook and Twitter, with some additional localized functions. From the homepage a user can publish a post with a maximum of 140 characters (figure 8), which follows the same limit as Twitter, but can provide a lot more information because of the greater complexity of Chinese characters. 140 characters on Twitter can only be a headline, while on Weibo, it is at least a paragraph if not a complete news piece (Gu 2014, p. 73). Similar to Twitter, one can also mention other users by adding “@” in front of the usernames in a post. They can also create topics by adding “#” in front and end of the keywords or phrases. On the current version of Weibo, users can insert emotional icons, multiple pictures (Figure 9), videos, music, documents, and links in a post, and can also conduct polls, or schedule a post (Figure 8). The pictures will enlarge when a user clicks on it (Figure 9). Links will be shortened automatically when inserted into a post in order to save the characters. A user can also publish a “long post” (blog) that exceeds 140 characters, which will be presented as a link that is connected to a textual “long post”, or shown as a picture (figure 10) with the help of the “Sina long Weibo post tool” or other long post generating software. To post “long post” as pictures can also become a method to avoid the censorship based on keyword filtering.

The newsfeed section shows the recent activities of people that a user is following. One can repost (forward, retweet), comment or like a post (“like” is a new function added in 2013). The comment number and repost number are both shown on the bottom of a post. A user can click the “forward” button (or the “repost” button on the mobile version) to repost. One can also add comment that is less than 140 characters while they are reposting. The original post and the

user's comment will both be displayed in the repost on his / her personal page. When a user reposts a repost, the previous users who reposted can be mentioned (Figure 11). The act of reposting, especially without adding comments, often means agreement and support to the original post. A user can click the "comment" button under the post to comment on a post. When they click the "comment" button, they can also view all the comments on this post based on chronological order. One can also "like" a comment, and the most liked comments will be listed on the top when one clicks the "hot" comments. One can also reply a comment under the post, which encourages more interactions between users with different opinions about the same topic. One can also check the "also forward to my Weibo" box when they comment on a post, or check the "comment to ××× (author name)" box when they repost so that they can comment and repost at the same time (Figure 11). In addition to these functions, Weibo also has other applications such as hot topic, photo album, message, game, music, vdisk (online storage), apps center etc.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1. Online Survey

I published the online questionnaire on the questionnaire service website Wenjuan (www.wenjuan.com) from May 26th 2014 to July 10th 2014. During this period 565 effective questionnaires were collected from participants of all genders, careers, educational levels and income levels from all parts of the country, with ages from 18 to 63.

78.94% of the participants (446 participants) are Weibo users and 21.06% are not. In the questionnaire I asked the frequency and duration of their use of Weibo. The survey shows that most participants use Weibo quite frequently (Figure 12), and users are likely to use their fragmented time on Weibo (Figure 13). For many participants, Weibo is mainly a tool for social networking, information sharing and entertainment. As for the question “who do you follow the most on Weibo”, most people indicated that they use Weibo to follow people that they know off-line (69.96%), followed by information sharing Weibo accounts (jokes, quotations, beauty, fashion, food, health, travel, ext.) (47.98%) and entertainment and sports stars (40.36%) (Figure 14). Similarly, as for the question “what types of Weibo posts do you follow and repost the most”, most participants answered that they use Weibo to follow the activities of friends off-line (40.36%), followed by those who follow humorous jokes (33.41%), food and health and travel (32.29%) (Figure 15).

The majority of participants responded that expression on Weibo is free, and that Weibo has a big impact on Chinese society. When asked the level of influence of Weibo discussions on off-line social issues or events, 70.26% answered that Weibo creates a big influence, among whom 55.22% answered that it has a fairly big influence and 15.04% indicating that it has a very big influence on social issues or events off-line. 29.73% of the participants answered that the

influence of Weibo discussions on off-line social issues and events is small, among whom 21.06% held that it creates fairly small influences, and 8.67% responded that it has little influence (Figure 16). When asked the level of freedom of expression on Weibo, 75.76% indicated that one is free to express oneself on Weibo, among whom 66.73% replied that Weibo is a fairly free platform and 9.03% answered that it is very free. The rest 24.25% responded that Weibo is not a free platform, among whom 19.65% indicated that it's fairly unfree, and only 4.60% answered it is very unfree (Figure 17). Most (58.23%) of the participants held a positive attitude to the relation between Sina Weibo communication and democracy, indicating that use of Sina Weibo increase democracy; 31.86% believed that Sina Weibo use has no influence on democracy; only 2.83% answered that use of Sina Weibo reduces democracy; 7.08% selected "other" (Figure 18).

The survey result also shows that gender influences participants' attitudes toward freedom and the social impact of Weibo. From Figure 19, 20 and 21 we can see that females tend to be more positive about the influence of Weibo discussions on off-line social issues, freedom of expression and Weibo's role in increasing democracy, while males hold a comparatively more negative view toward these issues. A larger proportion of females indicated that Weibo communication has a big impact on society, with Weibo discussions comparatively free, and that the use of Weibo increases democracy. Other demographic features, such as age, income level and educational level do not have any obvious correlations with the result of these questions.

When asked why they thought the use of Weibo increased, reduced or had no influence on democracy, the reasons for the 329 participants (58.23% of all participants) to select "the use of Weibo has increased democracy" are categorized into the following six dimensions.

1) Free expression: Weibo is comparatively free for expression and sharing. Of the 329 participants who replied that use of Weibo increases democracy, 63 mentioned the word

“freedom” (*ziyou*), followed by those who mentioned “free speech” (*yanlun ziyou*) (46), “comparatively free” (*xiangdui ziyou / bijiao ziyou*) (15), “expression” (*biaoda*) (10), “comment” (*pinglun*) (9), “right to speak” (*fayan quan / fabiao quan / huayu quan*) (7), “discuss / debate” (*taolun*) (5), “communicate” (*jiaoliu*) (4). Five indicated that it is free to comment on Weibo. One participant responded, “Though there is some limit, at least it provides an alternative platform for expression” (female, age 22, student); and another indicated, “It’s a platform where we can make our voice heard” (male, age 40, doctor).

2) Speed and range: Weibo communication is fast and widespread. “Fast (*kuai / xunsu*)” (20), “widespread (*guang / guangfan*)”, (14) “first time (*diyi shijian*)” (4) and “promptness (*jishi*)” (3) were mentioned in the answers. For example, one participant said, “Weibo enables people to learn about ongoing issues instantly” (male, age 30, online salesperson).

3) Public supervision: public opinions on Weibo can lead to pressure on the government. Eighteen out of the 329 participants mentioned “public opinion” (*yulun*), followed by those who mentioned “supervision” (*jiandu / jiankong*) (16), “pressure” (*yali*) (7), “participate” (*canyu*) (5), “people’s will” (*minyi*) (5), “public opinion pressure” (*yulun yali*) (4) and “public opinion supervision” (*yulun jiandu*) (3). For example, one participant answered, “Though there are deletions of posts, they are still exposed to the public and therefore will give some pressure to the government” (male, age 30, researcher). Another explained, “The Weibo discussion about PM 2.5 [air pollution index] urged the government to pay more attention to the environment issues” (male, age 30, government staff). Another one gave an example of “the cancellation of labor education (*laojiao*) system” (male, age 27, government staff).

4) Transparency: Weibo communication makes social issues more transparent to the public. Words such as “open” (*gongkai*) (14) and “transparency” (*touming*) (12) were mentioned

in these responses. Two mentioned that Weibo could “expose corruptions”. One participant answered, “Weibo exposes a lot of truth to people” (female, 40, sales agent). Another participant responded, “Since we have Weibo, it’s more difficult for government officials to conduct ‘black-box operations’” (female, age 22, student).

5) Accessibility: anybody can use Weibo easily. Thirteen mentioned “grassroots / the mass / common people” (*caogen / baixing / dazhong / putong ren / putong qunzhong / pingmin*) and 6 mentioned “convenient” (*fangbian*). One participant said, “For some issues, Weibo let the weak make their voice” (female, age 30, editor); another wrote, “It’s convenient to participate, instant to share, and free to speak on Weibo” (other gender, age 39, government staff).

6) Information source: Weibo serves as an alternative source of information to the mainstream media. “Information spreading” (*xinxi chuanbo*) (12), “information channel” (*xinxi qudao*) (5), “obtaining information” (*huoqu xinxi / huode xinxi*) (4) were mentioned in the answers. As one participant answered, “Since we have this new information channel, the imbalance of information obtaining is reduced” (female, age 23, student). Another responded, “Weibo has changed the situation of the dominance of the mass media” (female, age 27, website editor). Another said, “I can hear multiple comments on Weibo” (female, age 27, unemployed).

These six dimensions overlap and intertwine with each other. From these responses we can learn that for most Chinese Internet users, the Chinese cyber world, especially the social media, is not as “unfree” as many Westerners might presume. Furthermore, many Chinese people are aware of the censorship, but have found censorship has not blocked all communication. On the contrary, for most Internet users, social media like Weibo provide comparatively free spaces for their engagement in discussions and participation in social issues and events.

Of the 16 participants (2.83% of all participants) who selected the option “the use of Weibo has reduced democracy”, 8 people mentioned state control or “unfreedom” (*bu ziyou*). In addition, one participant wrote that “Weibo creates and spreads rumor” (*zaoyao chuanyao*).

For the 180 participants (31.86% of all participants) who selected the option that use of Weibo has little influence on democracy, many also provided reasons. 1) Forty-six mentioned the effectiveness of Weibo discussion in solving issues and making change. For example, as some participants filled out, “Right to speak \neq democracy” (male, age 24, student), “Democracy isn’t decided by media” (male, age 40, telecommunication worker), “Weibo discussion does not influence policy” (male, age 63, teacher). Some indicated that the government does not care about and respond to the public debates, “Weibo is only a channel to get information, while democracy is decided by the state’s system and policy” (female, age 32, finance worker). This response shows a traditional Chinese way of viewing “democracy”, as top-down rather than a bottom-up way of policy making. Another participant said, “In mainland China people have a low capacity for accepting ideas with different ideologies. Usually what they do is carrying out personal abuse rather than effective debates. Such an audience cannot create real free speech. Weibo’s only social influence is that it can expose corruption. But Weibo cannot solve the power issues” (female, 28, IT product manager). This answer demoralized the emotional expressions by describing them as “ineffective” and “not real free speech”, which according to Guobin Yang, represents the dominant values as opposed to its dissents, and therefore indicates the clash between different morals and values (2011, p. 59).

2) Thirty-four participants were critical about the Chinese political system and Chinese government’s control of the Internet. Some mentioned “unfreedom”, “limited freedom”, “government control” or “state’s control”. For example, one participant said, “As long as there is

no empowerment, it's no use" (male, age 29, researcher). Some others wrote, "There is no democracy in China" (male, age 53, manager), "Critical opinions are blocked" (female, age 27, interpreter), and "Sensitive contents are deleted" (female, age 25, student).

3) Five people doubted the reliability of the information source. 4) Four indicated that Weibo is mainly for entertainment or personal networking rather than a tool to bring social and political change. 5) Three mentioned the accessibility of Weibo, for example, "There is democratization in China, but there are so many factors that lead to this process, and Weibo is only one of them. Moreover, compared to the population of the whole country, the ones who have Weibo accounts are the minority after all" (male, age 46, government staff).

In regard to Sina Weibo's influence on participants themselves, 62.48% answered that Weibo enables them to hear multiple opinions; 28.14% indicated that Weibo provides more platforms for expression; 11.15% said that use of Weibo changes their values; 8.50% replied that use of Weibo changes their lifestyles; 24.07% responded that use of Weibo has no influence on them; and 2.83% selected "other" (Figure 22).

The social issues and events that participants comment and repost the most are educational issues (41.70%) and food safety (40.81%), followed by environmental issues (31.17%), corruption (25.34%), healthcare policies (22.87%), judicial and legal justice (17.94%), income gap (12.78%), gender discrimination (6.28%), and land issues (6.05%). In addition, 21.75% answered none of the above and 7.40% selected "other" (Figure 23).

As for the open-ended question asking "the most recent social issue or event you followed", I categorized the answers into different themes. The 10 most frequently mentioned themes were "anti-terrorism" (43), education (21), "anti-evil cult" (14), food safety (13), health care (9), traffic accident (9), environment (8), corruption (7), children's rights (6), and legal

justice (3). The most frequently mentioned incidents or events were the Xinjiang “terrorist” attack (33), the Zhaoyuan “evil cult” murder (14), the missing Malaysia Airline MH 370 plane (10), the College Entrance Examination (9), the Anti-Corruption Campaign (7), the Yulin Dog Eating Festival (6), patient-hospital disputes (4), the Kunming training station “terrorist” attack (4), and water pollution (3). Most of these are incidents or events that took place in the period of this research, from May 2014 to September 2014. All the participants who talked about the Xinjiang or Kunming “terrorist” incident supported the government’s position, and indicated that they favored severe punishment for the “terrorists” or “criminals”. These answers show a high level of nationalist sentiment. While participants mentioned the recent Anti-Corruption Campaign launched by the new leadership, most of them supported the central government in punishing corrupted officials with a top-down approach. Furthermore, in response to which social issue they followed recently, 21 participants mentioned incidents regarding the private life of celebrities, such as the news that the actor Huang Haibo solicited prostitutes (8) and that the actor Wen Zhang cheated on his wife (5). In addition, 9 mentioned sports events; 7 mentioned the World Cup. This shows the big influence of the entertainment and sports industries in contemporary society as well as the blurred conception of social issues and the private life of celebrities. As we can see, Weibo and other social media are complex platforms where multiple forces and movements coexist and interfere.

4.2. Ethnography of Weibo

4.2.1. The Death of the Street Vendor

Xia Junfeng was a street vendor in the city of Shenyang in Northeastern China. Xia and his wife Zhang Jing used to sell grilled kebabs on the streets. On May 16, 2009, Xia had a fight

with two *chengguan* officers who accused him of selling things “illegally” without a “business license”. The Chinese word *chengguan* refers to City Urban Administrative and Law Enforcement Bureau officers, who are usually in charge of “illegal vendors” and are infamous for treating the penniless vendors violently. During this fight Xia killed the two *chengguan* officers with a food-cutting knife. He was convicted and received a penalty of “intentional homicide” and was sentenced to death. He appealed to the court several times but failed eventually. On September 25, 2013, Xia was executed.

The Xia Junfeng Case aroused nationwide discussion on Weibo because of what many considered the unjust verdict. More than 1.4 million posts were created by netizens on Weibo, far more than other social media and online forums in China (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Institute of Journalism and Communication 2013, p. 221). According to data accessed from Weibo Data (data.weibo.com/index), from November 11, 2013 to May 11, 2014, 70.8% of users who mentioned “Xia Junfeng” were male, with only 29.2% female. In comparison, 40.6% of users who mentioned “Zhang Jing” were male, while 59.4% were female. These data indirectly reflect the gender differences in the discussion of the case. Overall, men tended to focus more on the issues of legal and social justice, while women tended to pay more attention to the livelihood of the surviving family of Xia. This reflects the socially constructed gender roles of women paying more attention to domestic issues while men are supposed to discuss more about social and political issues. Moreover, the data show that most people mentioning the two names are in Beijing, Guangdong, Shanghai, and Zhejiang, Chinese cities with higher income levels, as well as Liaoning, where Xia’s case took place. This reveals the fact that there is an obvious regional division of social media use based on average income levels (Figure 24).

Xia Junfeng’s wife Zhang Jing created a Weibo account on May 13, 2011, calling herself

“Shenyang Zhang Jing”, with a black-and-white family picture as her profile picture. In the picture Zhang and her husband Xia Junfeng hold their son of about two or three years old between them. Her account was verified by Sina with a short title: “the wife of the street vendor Xia Junfeng from Shenyang”. Since the creation of this account, Zhang Jing has been publishing posts on Weibo frequently. Up to May 9, 2014, she had 101,573 followers and 9,886 posts.

Her first post published on May 13, 2011 reads:

“I am Zhang Jing from Shenyang who has come to Beijing for the case of Xia Junfeng. I appreciate the support and help of everybody. I will be strong and will never give up. Hope you continue supporting me. Thank you...” (Zhang Jing, May 13, 2011)

This post was reposted 6,079 times and commented on 3,775 times. Her threads drew the attention and sympathy from netizens. Most people who commented and reposted her thread tended to support her case. In the comments, the words “*zhichi*” (support), “*zhufu*” (bless) “*jiayou*” (“add fuel”, a Chinese phrase to show support) were frequently mentioned. A lot of people, including celebrities, lawyers, intellectuals and ordinary netizens, started donating money to her so she could hire a lawyer and support her family. For example, the famous writer Li Chengpeng donated 100,000 Yuan (16,010 USD) to her. Zhang expressed her appreciation publicly to the donors on her Weibo.

On May 14, 2011, Zhang Jing published another post:

“I only have one appeal, which is to find the truth and seek a lawful judgment. Our family is poor but we were happy. It is the violence of *chengguan* that has destroyed our family. Now they are denying the fact that my husband was beaten first and that he was protecting himself. We refuse to accept the verdict” (Zhang Jing, May 14, 2011).

The post was reposted 4,796 times and commented on 2,425 times. While some argued that Xia killed two people and therefore deserved the penalty of “life for a life” (*sharen changming*), the majority argued that Xia was innocent, or at least did not deserve the death

sentence because they believed the two *chengguan* officers should take some responsibility. In addition to showing sympathy and support for the family, the netizens carried on a heated discussion about the general misbehavior of *chengguan* officers, whose ill performance is notorious in China. In the comments, people used words such as “*yeman*” (brutal), “*baoli*” (violent), “*bushi ren*” (inhuman), and “*sangjin tianliang*” (heartless) to describe *chengguan* officers, which shows netizens’ anger towards *chengguan* officers elicited from Xia’s story. Some netizens even commented that Xia was a hero because he “got rid of the evil for the people (*weimin chuhai*)”. Some others questioned the equity of the legal system, mentioning the corruption and misbehavior of government officials, who received very light penalties, compared to Xia. User T commented,

“The judiciary is not fair but humanity is fair. Please believe civilians will have their day” (T, May 13, 2011).

Another user Y indicated that Xia’s case was not the only clash between *chengguan* and the vendors; the trial was also a clash between different classes, and the trial procedure was illegal but Xia could do nothing but endure (Y, September 3, 2012).

Zhang Jing kept updating the progress of the case of her husband even after the trial had concluded. The mentioning of the names “Xia Junfeng” and “Zhang Jing” reached a peak in late September 2013, when Xia was sentenced to death (Figure 25). On September 25, 2013, Zhang published a post with a picture of herself crying in despair:

“I’m going to meet Xia Junfeng for the last time 🙏🙏” (Zhang Jing, September 25, 2013).

This post was commented on 45,108 times and reposted 27,450 times (Figure 26). On the same day #Xia Junfeng Case# became the number one hot topic on Weibo, and “Xia Junfeng” became the second hottest search word on Weibo. As the wife of the vendor, coming from the lower

social class in China, Zhang Jing's appearance and protest on Weibo created an image of the lower social class online. On Weibo she created her identity as a wife of a street vendor and a mother by adding the verified title and the profile picture. The outcry of netizens reflected their anger and dissatisfaction with the particular verdict and the general misbehavior of government staff.

Zhong Guolin, Xia's defense lawyer, was engaged in the online discussion. Zhong used a picture of a flying bird as his Weibo profile picture. He is a verified user with a verified title: senior lawyer in the Jingheng Law Firm. In a post published on September 25, 2013, the day before the final judgment of the case, Zhong argued that since the killing was the result of resistance and happened during the fight, Xia did not deserve the death sentence (Zhong Guolin, September 25, 2013). Chen Youxi, the director of the law firm also engaged in the discussion. Chen is also a verified user and uses a profile picture of himself with a professional look, wearing a suit and tie and with a smile. In one thread, he placed the web link to his argument in court (Chen Youxi, July 18, 2012), which was reposted 15,694 times and commented on 2,254 times. In another post, he commented on the written judgment of the Supreme Court:

“The written statement of the Supreme Court acknowledges that the two *chengguan* officers have fault, but they still judged the case as “intentional homicide”, then what's the point of their ‘fault’ ”? (Chen Youxi, September 26, 2013)

This thread was reposted 447 times and commented on 133 times.

Li Chengpeng, a famous writer in China, who had 7,430,394 followers and 4,189 posts on Weibo as of May 10, 2014, was also involved in the discussion. Li was also a verified user with a short title: writer. In his introduction he simply wrote: “whatever” (*suibian*). Li was often nicknamed “big eyes (*da yan*)” by the netizens because of his handsome face with big eyes. He published a post with the link to an article on his own Sina Blog on May 13, 2011 titled *The One*

Who Kills Is a Father. In the article, he referred to the stories of folk heroes who challenged the authorities in ancient and contemporary eras. He wrote that those people were remembered as heroes but Xia was labeled as a murderer (Li Chengpeng, May 13, 2011). This post was reposted 28,916 times and commented on 6,076 times on Weibo. A lot of people commented: “good article”; some simply used the onomatopoeic word “*ai*” to show their pity to Xia’s story; some copied paragraphs and sentences from Li’s article; some others just reposted Li’s post without adding comments. L commented:

“If ‘life for a life’ is their basic principle, the so called justice will be totally nonsense, because the ones who kill the most and deserve death the most are sitting back in their high positions” (L, May 16, 2011).

Another person H commented on Li’s post:

“Our country still has hope only because we still have a few people like you” (H, July 16, 2012).

However, Li Chengpeng’s account was removed from Weibo after July 7, 2014, due to his criticisms against the government, which aroused a new round of heated discussions on Weibo.

Opinion leaders such as Li Chengpeng have played very important roles in the political and social discussions on Weibo. These people are often called *gongzhi*, a short form for “*gonggong zhishi fenzi*” which means “public intellectuals”. *Gongzhi* are usually well-known writers, journalists or scholars who participate actively in online discussions about social and political issues. With higher educational levels and the talent for using humorous language, *gongzhi* often express their thoughtful opinions on social and political issues. In Chinese cyber space the activities of *gongzhi* play a crucial role in forming a culture of criticism and resistance toward the authorities. However, opinions of these intellectuals, especially the dissidents against the authorities, are very likely to be censored.

Yi Nengjing, a well-known actress from Taiwan published a post on September 26, 2013.

She highlighted her support for the paintings by Qiangqiang, Xia Junfeng and Zhang Jing's son. Yi emphasized that she respected the judiciary but would like to devote herself to charity (Yi Nengjing, September 26, 2013). Yi's thread was reposted 7,187 times and commented on 8,011 times (Figure 27). Celebrities like Yi Nengjing tend to avoid engaging in the discussion of legal justice and instead focus on charity, and the improvement of their own public image. Therefore their discussions have limitations. However, their engagement contributed to more social attention to the case.

People's Daily, the largest government-party newspaper, has 19,971,015 followers and 28,670 posts on Weibo as of May 11, 2014. On October 1, 2013, *People's Daily* published a long post titled *Sympathy is a Virtue but the Law Should be Our Baseline*. The long post held that the public opinions were based on the sympathy of people towards the weak, but sympathy should not exceed the authority of the law (*People's Daily*, October 1, 2013) (Figure 28). The post then received an overwhelming response from netizens. One user S commented,

“People sympathize with Xia not simply based on our morality. The tongues [of the party] should stop showing off. How dare they talk about ‘the baseline of law’? Among the officials that are tried in recent months, which one does not deserve death according to the standard of law? Does it mean the court shows sympathy to them?” (S, October 16, 2013).

Another commenter X posted:

“The problem is that the baseline is elastic” (X, Oct 1, 2013).

A number of the comments to the thread of the *People's Daily* were in agreement with the party newspaper and some reiterated what the *People's Daily* had said in the post. Some of these accounts look suspiciously like “fake accounts” created by government staff: many have no profile pictures; they do not create their own original posts and only repost or comment on posts of accounts of government departments and branches, adding positive comments; their

comments are usually short, direct and repeating; one user might post the same comment twice at a time; one user have very few posts altogether on their personal page, unusually less than ten. It is common that the government and some state media hire people to post positive comments online to influence public opinions. People satirically name these employees the “fifty-cent party (*wumao dang*)” because they joke that these people make fifty cents for each post. In addition to these fake accounts, there are also a number of real netizens who believe and support what the state media claims online. The criticisms and the naming of the “fifty-cent party” show the debates and interactions between the state and netizens, and between people holding different opinions, which then form a discursive space of plural discourses on the Internet.

Compared to the narratives on Weibo, the state mass media *People’s Daily* and its affiliate adopted the “Xia Junfeng is guilty” frame and “the *chengguan* officers’ families are also victims” frame. For example, on March 12, 2014, the *People’s Daily* published an article titled “Zhou Qiang Talked about the Xia Junfeng Case: If This Is Legitimate Defense, Then There Will Be Great Disorder under Heaven (*Tianxia Daluan*)” (Y. Yang 2014). According to the article, Zhou Qiang, the chief judge of the Supreme Court, stated that people like Xia Junfeng must be punished with due severity. He affirmed that people should not hold “biased” views because the two persons killed were *chengguans* and the person who killed was a vendor. Huanqiu.com, the website of *Global Times*, the affiliate of *People’s Daily*, published articles focusing on the families of the two *chengguan* officers. It pointed out that “opinions on the Internet do not equal public opinion” and iterated that “facts speak louder than words”. Therefore, in a situation where the mass media is subject to control by the state, the Internet provides people with a new sphere for the expression of dissatisfaction with legal judgments, for outcry for social justice, as well as a forum for interaction between people holding different opinions.

The publication of news articles in the mass media led to another round of discussion of the case. For example, a user named “Tang Gula” published a Weibo post:

“The law has not given *chengguan* the right to restrict the freedom of humans. Nor does it give *chengguan* the right to handle people’s properties at their will. The illegal doings of the *chengguan* led to their dispute with Xia Junfeng and caused the killing. The *chengguan* officers are already proved by the lawyer to give false testimonies. I want to ask the judges in the highest positions, who were the ones that does whatever they want? Is it the vendor Xia Junfeng or the *chengguans* that have violated rights, or the judges like you who are legally blind?” (Tang Gula, March 12, 2014)

This post was reposted 62 times and commented on 35 times. “Tang Gula” is a verified user with the title “a well-known volunteer of the disaster of Sichuan Earthquake, the forum moderator of Sina Green Silk Ribbon BBS, Tang Gula, a member of Sina Charity Group”. In the profile picture, he stands among the earthquake ruins. He also wrote in his introduction: “As the endeavor of a citizen, promote and witness the progress of Chinese society”.

4.2.2. The Triumph of the Sanitation Workers

In China, cyber space has become an essential battleground for workers to express their resistance and strive for their rights. Chinese workers have long been utilizing websites, online forums, and blogs to organize and mobilize strikes and protests. On Weibo, numerous individual workers, worker’s organizations, labor unions, activists, scholars and students upload photos and videos, explain their grievances, express their demands and report the progress of their protests.

From August 2014 through September 2014, 220 sanitation workers who worked for Guangzhou GrounDey Property Management Co., Ltd. went on strike. For nine years, this state-owned company had been in charge of the business in the University Town in the city of Guangzhou, the capital city of Guangdong Province in Southern China. Earlier in April 2014, the GrounDey Company lost the bid in the sanitation business in University Town; another company

was supposed to take over in September. The GrounDey Company did not notify the workers about this change. When the old contracts expired, the company intentionally made the sanitation workers sign new four-month contracts, and changed the working location from “the University Town” to “Fanyu” (the district) or “Guangzhou” (the city), which paved the way for resettlement beneficial to the company. When the workers found out about this in August, they initiated their resistance (J. Wang 2014).

Chen Weixiang is a medical student in Sun Yat-sen University and activist in Guangzhou. His profile picture shows someone looking like a student, wearing a red T-shirt and glasses. He introduced himself: “an independent activist (*gongyi ren*), a son of farmers, a medical student who is not a medical student, a pilgrim of good life”. On August 21, he published a long post *On the First Day of School, The Sanitation Workers in the University Town Went on a Strike to Strive for Their Rights* (Figure 10) which reads,

“August 21 was the first day of school. On the same day, over 200 sanitation workers in the University Town went on a strike at GOGO New Plaza, holding a banner which wrote ‘Exposed to the sun and the rain, our contracts are ended; our seniority is not recognized. We ask the government to help us’ (Chen Weixiang, August 21, 2014).

This long post described the workers’ situation and added pictures of sanitation workers holding a red banner on the street. It explained that the workers were employed under the government’s promise and had been working for the Guangzhou GrounDey Property Management Co., Ltd. for nine years, during which they had signed renewal contracts three times. According to the labor law, the company should have signed non-fixed-term labor contracts with them due to their nine-year seniority, but the company did not do so, which was obviously against the law. Moreover, many of the contracts lacked information such as working location, type of work, and beginning and end date; the company had required that some workers

apply their fingerprints on empty contracts. In August 2014, the Guangzhou GrounDey Company lost the bid to the Suicheng Company. The workers all live in the University Town and were unwilling to relocate or to change their job classification. The Suicheng Company was willing to employ them but was unwilling to recognize their nine years of seniority; it was not willing to sign permanent labor contracts with the workers. The workers protested on the streets frequently by students; however the few students who supported them were forcibly dragged away by the police. Furthermore, the company had been cutting workers since 2010, which increased the workload of those remaining two or three times. At the same time, their salary remained only 2200-2400 RMB (358-391 USD), with the employer holding back money if they didn't finish their tasks every day. In the comment section of the post, Chen Weixiang “@” several intellectuals, scholars and organizations so they can help spread the word, and this post was reposted 100 times.

On August 22, the workers filed petitions to both the GrounDey Company and the government, asking for a response within three days, and indicating that otherwise they would “take action”. The petition highlighted their concern about resettlement, contracts, workload, working conditions and benefits. On August 23, with the help of a local non-profit organization, the workers held their first meeting and elected representatives to handle their internal administration, negotiation and finance. On the second meeting on August 25, they discussed and arranged strategies of action (J. Wang 2014). On the same day, the workers went to the company.

The workers created the Weibo account “University Town Sanitation Workers” (*Daxuecheng Huanwei Gongren*) on August 24, 2014; it had 614 followers and had 201 published posts as of October 3, 2014. Several sanitation workers are on the profile picture wearing their uniforms with “city cleaning” on the back. In the introduction on their Weibo page

it says: “We are sanitation workers in the University Town in the City of Guangzhou. We dedicate our youth and sweat silently to create a clean and comfortable environment.”

On August 25, 2014, “University Town Sanitation Workers” published its first original post through mobile phone, with two pictures of a group of workers. The post reads,

“We are getting together at the office of the company” (University Town Sanitation Workers, August 25, 2014, 15:27).

Since then the “University Town Sanitation Workers” has provided regular reports on the strike and the reactions of the company officials every few minutes via mobile phone. For example, one post reads,

“The company leaders are still playing with us and cheating us, and not replying to our reasonable appeals...” (University Town Sanitation Workers, August 25, 2014, 17:25)

This post was reposted 24 times. By using mobile phones, the workers were able to report first-hand news faster than any other news source, and express their demands and opinions from their own perspective. This unmediated presentation of their situations aroused much more attention from people on Weibo.

A few minutes later, Wang Jiansong, a professor at China Institute of Industrial Relations, who is a verified Weibo user, uploaded the same pictures of the protesting workers and described the situation. This post was reposted 25 times. In the profile picture, Wang Jiansong has a professional look with a mild smile, and wears a brown sweater and glasses. His introduction reads, “A volunteer of workers’ activism (*gongyi*), *Tragedy of Humanity and Tragedy of Life, The Birth of Tragic Philosophy, Individual Freedom and Social Responsibility, Labor Philosophy, The Self-Enlightenment of Intellectuals*, this Weibo does not represent the opinions of the institution that I work for”. He has 37,004 followers as of October 5, 2014. In the post he wrote,

“@ University Town Sanitation Workers, at 3 pm this afternoon, over 200 sanitation workers went to the office of the property company at the North Commercial Center of the University Town in Guangzhou, to wait for the response to their appeal to the reasonable resettlement caused by the termination of the company’s construction contract. All the workers are demanding to continue to work in University Town, and recover their rights and interests. The company officials are still playing with us and cheating us, and not replying to our reasonable appeals...” (Wang Jiansong, August 25, 2014)

University students also played an active role in the campaign. Chen Weixiang, the student volunteer mentioned previously, published a blog on Sina Blog titled *Joint Petition of University Students: Sanitation Workers Are Striving for Rights, What Should University Students Do?* In the blog, he called for a joint petition from university students. He also used his Weibo to update the relevant information about the petition. In only four days, he collected electronic signatures from 725 students from 124 universities in China and overseas (W. Chen 2014). He also created the topic #One Person One Letter to the University Town Administration Committee#, asking university students to write letters to the appropriate government departments (Chen Weixiang, September 12, 2014). People who participated in this action took their pictures when dropped the letters into the postbox and “@” Chen Weixiang. In addition, Chen Weixiang also called for donations for the campaign, creating a topic called #One Bottle of Water for One Person#, and asked people to donate a small amount of money for the workers to buy water (Chen Weixiang, August 28, 2014, 21:03).

Another student volunteer Zhang Xiaoxun initiated a campaign on Weibo. He uploaded a picture of himself holding a piece of paper with the slogan “reasonable resettlement for University Town sanitation workers”. In the post he wrote,

“I am Zhang Xiaoxun. I support the strike of University Town sanitation workers, and appeal to GrounDey Company to provide reasonable resettlement for the workers. Please take pictures and @ three friends” (Zhang Xiaoxun, August 27, 2014).

He mentioned three other users in the post. Numerous university students thus participated in this campaign by uploading their pictures and “@” their friends. In addition, many other university students in Guangzhou joined the off-line protest with the workers, and some created performance art on the street in support (Chen Weixiang, August 28, 2014, 9:46).

Students adopted more creative and artistic methods to circulate the protest than either the workers or their professors. These students are often known as “post-90” generation, the “one child” in their families, who are thought to carry more individualistic characteristics than the elder generations. These “digital native generation” have grown up during the booming of the information age and Internet media, and are more skillful at digital and Internet communication. In this case, the students not only reported first hand news about the incident on Weibo, but also created hot topics and used more symbolic activism, such as initiating online petition and taking their pictures and “@” three more friends. More importantly, the success of the campaign lies in the combination of online campaigns with their off-line actions.

From August 25 to September 12, “University Town Sanitation Workers” continuously updated first-hand information about their strike. Getting no response from the company, the workers stopped working and went out onto the street. On August 26, they reported that one of the workers fainted because of tiredness and heat exhaustion from the sun (University Town Sanitation Workers, August 26, 2014). On August 28, they reported that the police had arrested their lawyer and injured a female worker (University Town Sanitation Workers, August 28, 2014, 10:56; 11:00), which further triggered their anger. One of the posts on this day reads,

“The District Federation of Trade Union just said they want us to use their free legal aid lawyer. Why should we use your lawyer? We strongly demand the release of the lawyer that was arrested! We want our own lawyer! Release Lawyer Wu, and negotiate as soon as possible!” (University Town Sanitation Workers, August 28, 2014,12:04)

This post was reposted 430 times, including by some lawyers (Figure 29). About four hours later, the police released the lawyer, and the workers posted,

“Finally released!” (University Town Sanitation Workers, August 28, 2014, 15:50)

On August 30, they reported that the GrounDey Company had been tailing and harassing one of their workers and their families (University Town Sanitation Workers, August 30, 2014). In addition, “University Town Sanitation Workers” also uploaded pictures and gave appreciation to the university students who supported them by sending water and fruit, as well as to the workers’ organizations and volunteers in other cities who mailed food and donated money. They also publicized the amount of donors’ donations.

As a result of their own off- and on-line actions, and the support from NGOs, numerous writers, scholars and students, both on- and off-line, the workers were able to negotiate with the company with the presence of local government staff. During each round of negotiations they published a “long post” which described the process of the negotiation and contained pictures. The most important sentences were marked in red. In their first round of negotiation on September 3, the workers were dissatisfied with the company’s offer of resettlement compensation of 1000 Yuan (163 USD) each year for each worker (University Town Sanitation Workers, September 3, 2014). In the third round of negotiation on September 4, the company offered to raise the resettlement compensation to 2000 Yuan (326 USD). The workers were still not satisfied and reiterated their four demands: compensation money, wages for layoff period, social insurance and a housing fund (University Town Sanitation Workers, September 4, 2014). In the fourth round of negotiation on September 5, the company offered to raise the resettlement compensation to 2500 Yuan (408 USD) and agreed to pay the wages for the layoff period and the social insurance, but the two sides could not reach agreement on the housing fund (University

Town Sanitation Workers, September 5, 2014). In the last round of negotiation on September 9, both sides finally reached a consensus. Their post on that day reads,

“Today all of our workers signed the negotiation protocol. After one month of protest and 15 days of sit-in, the strike finally led to an agreement on seniority, social insurance and a housing fund. Finally we got a satisfactory result. The 220 sanitation workers of the University Town again appreciate the concern and support of people from all social sectors and the university students! We sanitation workers will continue to provide everybody with a clean and beautiful city.” (University Town Sanitation Workers, September 9, 2014)

However, although the protocol was signed, in reality things were not going so smoothly. On September 10, the workers published a post that indicated that the new company actually was only allowing the local workers to return to work, and asked nonlocal workers to “wait on notifications” (University Town Sanitation Workers, September 10, 2014). This post was reposted 134 times. The workers regarded this move of the company as vengeful, as several of the active strikers and representatives were nonlocal workers. The professor Wang Jiansong indicated that another important reason for the company to take this move was to “cut” workers for more profits (J. Wang 2014). The workers therefore went on strike again.

On September 11, they published a new post with a picture, on which workers were raising their fists and shouting loudly, holding banners saying “We want to work” and “We want to work, we want to eat”. The post reads:

“We want to return to work, every single one of us, we all want to go back to work” (University Town Sanitation Workers, September 11, 2014).

This was reposted 79 times. A user M reposted and commented,

“After seeing the picture my eyes were filled with tears. The enterprise used a disgusting way to divide the workers, by employing the local workers and keeping the nonlocal workers waiting, which is totally against the proposed contract that all workers should be accepted back. The workers can still unite and defend themselves. Hope everybody is concerned about this issue! Fight against the injustice!” (M, September 11, 2014).

In another picture uploaded by the workers, several workers were holding a poster on which it said, “not afraid of mischief (*tiaobo lijian*), unity is power”, and on the bottom right, “Changzhou islanders support you” (University Town Sanitation Workers, September 12, 2014, 12:10). According to their posts later on September 12, all the workers received the resettlement compensation from the GrounDey Company at noon (University Town Sanitation Workers, September 12, 2014, 11:27), and the new company finally agreed to employ all the workers on the next day (University Town Sanitation Workers, September 12, 2014, 18:48). On September 13, the “University Town Sanitation Workers” published a post with a group of pictures on which the workers were working on the streets. The post reads,

“Today the sanitation workers who were protesting their rights are starting to clean the beautiful small island.” (University Town Sanitation Workers, September 13, 2014)

The strike of the sanitation workers in Guangzhou did not incite a nationwide discussion on Weibo, like Xia Junfeng’s case. However, it more effectively affected the decision making of the government and the state-owned company, and success led to the protection of workers’ rights and interests. It drew the attention and support of students, professors, lawyers, NGOs, and other workers and workers’ organizations from all parts of the country through Weibo. The success of the sanitation workers was due to multiple reasons. First, the workers’ arguments were straightforward and their collective goals were clear. As the workers went on strike, negotiated with the company and posted, reposted and commented on Weibo, they also effectively built and articulated their unified and collective identity. Therefore, when the company tried to divide them between nonlocal and local workers, all of the workers maintained solidarity, which was the key to their final success.

There were few if any news articles about the strike on national-level state media. Local

newspapers, such as the local party newspaper *Yangcheng Evening News Daily*, published 3 articles and the local commercial newspaper *Southern Metropolis*, published 4 articles about this issue. The *Yangcheng Evening News* minimized the incident by describing it as a “dispute” (*jiufen*) and “disturbance” (*fengbo*) between the workers and the company (Gan & Xu 2014a; 2014b). It also claimed that the reason for the incident to take place was the lack of government regulation in the marketization of sanitation industry (Gan & Xu 2014b). The *Southern Metropolis Daily*, which was known as a “liberal” newspaper, mentioned the workers “dissatisfactions” (*buman*) with the company, and that the company “cheated” (*qipian*) on the workers (Zhong & Wu 2014a; 2014b), but did not mention the role of government staff in the strike and negotiation. Though the newspapers interviewed workers, they took different perspectives than workers on Weibo. Both newspapers described the “mountainous trash” and “trash disaster” in the city during the workers’ strike (Wei 2014; Gan & Xu 2014a; Gan & Xu 2014b; Zhong & Wu 2014c; Zhong 2014), presenting their interest in the “public good” rather than the workers’ survival.

4.2.3. The “Anti-Trash” Battle

On May 10, 2014, a large scale “anti-trash” protest took place in Zhongtai Village (*Xiang*) in Yuhang District in the City of Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province in Eastern China. Tens of thousands of citizens protested the lack of local consent of residents for the local government’s plan to build a trash incineration plant in the village. Residents worried that the incineration would produce poisonous gas, resulting in serious environmental and health issues, for the plan was for the plant to be built close to a primary water source and a large tea field. Earlier on April 24, residents filed a petition with the signatures of 20 thousand people, and applied for a public

hearing in which they would be represented by 52 local residents. The Hangzhou government replied in written form that they accepted the petitions and applications. Then, on May 8, hearing that the government would start the construction, the villagers went on the streets (Fan 2014; Ying & Ling 2014).

The situation escalated into the violent confrontation between the local authority and the residents. The local government cracked down severely on the strike, and several strikers were arrested by the police. Few if any mainstream media in China reported any news about the construction plan before the people went to the streets. After the protest took place, the state media China News Service criminalized the protesters. It published 5 articles from May 11 to May 12, adopting a “public order” frame. For China News Service, this incident was an issue of the state’s stability. In an article published on May 12 it reported that the incident was the result of an “instigation (*shandong*)” by a few “criminals (*bufa fenzi*)”, with the large-scale riot leading to disruption of traffic. The “criminals” were arrested because they “smashed” (*daza*) and “ruined” (*sunhuai*) vehicles, “beat” (*ouda*) the police and innocent people and “disturbed the public order” (*raoluan gonggong zhixu*). It also accused the rioters for spreading “rumors” (*yaoyan*) online (J. Zhang & Xie 2014; H. Wang 2014a; H. Wang 2014b). The China News Service reported the number of protesters as “hundreds” (Guan 2014; Yejiao Zhao 2014), while netizens indicated that the numbers were in tens of thousands. The China News Service also reported that the government would guarantee the transparency of the issue and would not start the construction without the consent of residents (Guan 2014; Yejiao Zhao 2014). As a state media, the aim of China News Service was to maintain the society’s “stability” and show the party’s political “correctness”.

The foreign media BBC stood on the opposite side of the Chinese government. It

published 5 articles on the incident from May 11 to May 13, among which 4 articles were published on BBC Chinese site. The BBC adopted a “mass incidents” frame and a “problematic political system” frame. It described the incident as a “violent confrontation” (*baoli duikang*) and “violent clash” (*baoli chongtu*) (Heng 2014a; Ye 2014; Heng 2014b). It reported that this incident was one of the “tens of thousands of protests each year in China”, and frequently mentioned other “violent mass incidents” (BBC 2014; Ye 2014; Heng 2014b). The BBC also frequently reported that the cause of these incidents were the Chinese bureaucratic system which produces “corruption”, “land acquisition”, “environmental pollution”, “problems of law enforcement”, leading to general distrust toward the government among citizens (BBC 2014; Heng 2014a; Ye 2014; Heng 2014b; Geall 2014). The incident therefore became a political tool for the BBC to criticize the Chinese political system in general.

Social media, including Weibo, however, provided a platform for the witnesses from the grassroots to report information first-hand and express their opinions and emotions. As statistics accessed from Weibo Data show, the hot word trend of “Yuhang” reached a peak in the middle of May 2014 (Figure 30). 77.2% of netizens who mentioned “Yuhang” were male and only 22.8% were female during the period of April 12 to May 12. The majority of people who mentioned “Yuhang” were from Zhejiang Province, where the protest took place, followed by its neighboring province Jiangsu, the capital city Beijing, and Guangdong Province often considered one of the most “liberal” provinces in Southern China. People in the Eastern and Southern parts of China tended to participate more, compared to those in the Western and Northern parts of China (Figure 31).

On Weibo, a lot of local people in Yuhang expressed their anger toward the government’s decision, and uploaded pictures and screenshots from Wechat, a mobile phone

social media platform. Although some posts were removed, they were exposed to the public for a few hours before being deleted. This formed what Rauchfleisch and Schäfer call a “short-term public sphere”. For example, a user Z posted on May 10,

“[The government] is constructing the largest trash incineration plant in Zhongtai, Yuhang! Now there are ten thousand protesters! Many died 🙏! [I] don’t want this beautiful place to become a city of poisonous gas!” (Z, May 10, 2014)

Another Weibo user F posted on May 10:

“In Zhongtai, Hangzhou, five hundred armed policemen! Is this how you government treat people? Do you have to construct the incineration plant here? Is this more important than hundreds of thousands of people? Hangzhou people, let’s firmly oppose, oppose to it! Let’s help these oppressed people! Let’s repost the message! As a citizen of this country, I feel shame for the government.” (F, May 10, 2014)

These two posts were censored and deleted later. Another post published by user D on May 11 reads:

“Water can carry a boat, it can also overturn the boat [a sentence from an ancient Chinese poem which compares the relation between the people and the ruler with water and boat]. Hope the educated PRC government don’t forget this. Do things transparently. When you cheat them they will certainly revolt. Behave yourself!” (D, May 11, 2014)

This post was reposted 13 times and liked 23 times.

A Weibo user Q published a post with a picture on May 12,

“#Hangzhou Yuhang People Continuing Protesting# On May 11 night, Yuhang District, Zhejiang Province, large numbers of middle school students went on the street in spite of the rain, protesting against the corrupted officials’ construction of the incineration plant and the crackdown on villagers. On 12, all the shops in Yuhang voluntarily closed down and [shop owners] started to protest, and clashed with the police. The citizens say that in the 5.10 Zhongtai Incident, villagers were killed and injured by the police, the government owes people an apology and a reasonable explanation.” (Q, May 12, 2014)

This post had 28 likes, 41 reposts and 27 comments before it was deleted by the censorship.

Numerous posts like this were posted and shared, and the topics such as #Save West

Hangzhou#, #Yuhang Trash Incineration Incident#, and #Yuhang#, became hot topics on Weibo. 1662 people participated in the topic #Save West Hangzhou#, and 241 thousand read it. Some of the posts were deleted, which further triggered the rage of netizens who continued to repost and upload screenshots of previous posts. Some netizens indicated that innocent people were killed by the police in the crackdown, which was denied by the state media China News Service as “rumors”. Therefore how many protesters died remains a mystery. Some people uploaded pictures, in which some people were seriously injured and bleeding. Some uploaded videos. Others harshly criticized the government and the silence of the mainstream media.

Fan Zhongxin, a professor at Hangzhou Normal University, a verified user who has 98,736 followers as of September 3, 2014, was engaged in the discussion about this incident. On his profile picture Fan wears glasses and business suit, with one hand holding a loud-speaker, the other hand holding a book, and shouting out. Fan indicated that he lived only a few kilometers from the construction site. As he posted on May 10, 2014,

“Constructing an incineration plant was supposed to be an environmental project, and it makes sense for the government to do so. But forcibly doing it without environmental assessment, and hearing from the public is problematic. The armless people were presenting petitions peacefully. Is sending the armed police, arresting and beating people, and deterring them by bloody violence the only way? In such a project that is associated with the health of five hundred thousand people, why not implement deliberative democracy, the spirit of the 18th congress of CCP? ” (Fan Zhongxin, May 10, 2014)

This post was liked 903 times, reposted 5,147 times, and commented on 2,026 times (Figure 32). Netizens expressed their different opinions and emotions in the comments of Fan’s post. Some expressed their dissatisfaction with the government, while others tended to support the government. The majority of the comments tended to criticize the government, with some expressions more emotional and others more analytic. For example, the most popular comment, which was liked 31 times, posted by user J, criticized the government:

“The primary reason is that the government is having credit bankruptcy. Whatever they say, no one believes” (J, May 10, 2014).

Some other criticism focused more on the particular incident, for example, a user W commented,

“As long as the people have reasonable and fair appeals, the government should step back a little bit, and this would be very simple. If they had pulled out the police and enabled rational dialogue, rather than sending out all the police force in the city and forcibly cracking down on the protest, would the situation have become so serious? Why can’t the officials not act on impulses? Villagers are demanding environmental protection, and resisting the trash incineration. It was the government who started constructing without formal procedures. Why shouldn’t they be held accountable? It is the government who had fault at first” (W, May 12, 2014).

Some comments were supportive of the government’s decision. For example, user A commented:

“As for this case, I firmly support the government. Hangzhou is a scenic city, the government won’t destroy it. Building trash plants is always a process of balancing different interests. The government can postpone, but won’t stop construction” (A, May 11, 2014).

A few others replied to user A, “Why not build at your home?” Another user B also commented in Fan’s post,

“I hate this kind of rumor the most; never believe this kind of stuff where you even need to guess the authenticity, Instigating emotions is so disgusting” (B, May 11, 2014).

People like user A and user B are often labeled as “self-employed fifty-cent party” (*zi gan wu*), which refers to those who voluntarily refute “rumors” targeted at the state and accuse the dissidents of “betraying the country”, compared with the “fifty-cent party” who are employed by the government. Another user R commented,

“A lot of people don’t believe everything happening here, and some even say don’t listen to the rumors, but people here are living in hot water. We are losing our basic rights as humans; why are there still people who ridicule us and are indifferent to the incident?” (R, May 12, 2014)

Another user C commented:

“The key thing is in the so called NIMBY [Not in My Backyard]. Why do people in cities produce trash as part of their enjoyment of modern life, and let the people in the suburb pay the price? Those who claim that enjoying modern life must pay must make clear that, enjoying and paying should coexist, not A enjoys and let B pay and suffer” (C, May 11, 2014).

On May 12, Fan Zhongxin published another Weibo post,

“In the end of April in Yuhang Environmental Protest, the local residents filed a petition to the government with 20 thousand signatures. The residents were peacefully and rationally expressing their will. But several days later, three protesters (it was said that one of them was an environmental scholar) were arrested, and the situation was changed. The police and the people become antagonistic to each other, which led to the tragedy. If at the beginning, the government was willing to negotiate with the representatives, would all these have happened?” (Fan Zhongxin, May 12, 2014)

This post was liked by 165, reposted by 1,017 and commented by 287 on May 12, 2014, but was later blocked.

“Yuhang Release” (*Yuhang Fabu*) is the official Weibo account of the Yuhang local government. Its introduction reads: “official Weibo of the Information Office of the Yuhang Government”. This Weibo functions to publicize public information from the Yuhang government. On May 9, Yuhang Release posted a “long post” titled *Yuhang District People’s Government’s Announcement about the Jiufeng Environmental Power Project*, which indicated that the government would suspend and not implement the project before they got the support from the people, and would invite the local people to participate and hear their suggestions in the process, and therefore they asked people not to gather at the government office in order to maintain public order (*gonggong zhixu*) (Yuhang Release, May 9, 2014). The post received 46 comments and 1,611 reposts. A lot of verified official institutional and media users reposted this post (Figure 33). The majority of individual commenters expressed their disagreement and dissatisfaction with the government. For example, a verified user G who identified himself as a senior media professional, reposted adding the comment:

“Even if you have 10 thousand reasons, you abused the people, you should piss off! The ones who beat people, instantly piss off! 🤔🤔🤔” (G, May 11, 2014)

G’s repost was reposted 217 times.

On May 10, the same day that the mass clash took place, Yuhang Release published another long post titled *Important Announcement from the Yuhang Local Court, Procuratorate and Public Security Bureau*, which accused “a few people” of “inciting” the majority to endanger public safety (Yuhang Release, May 10, 2014). The page screenshot I took on May 10 shows that there were 266 comments and 484 reposts, while the page accessed on September 6 shows that there were 7,530 reposts but only 232 comments. A greater portion of supportive comments were shown on September 6. Therefore it is likely that some negative comments were deleted by “Yuhang Release”. However, the government could not delete all the negative comments. In addition, as one important feature of Weibo communication is promptness, a lot of the comments had already been read by readers and produced some responses from readers before being deleted.

N, a local government official of the city of Taizhou in Zhejiang Province, also became a key person in the discussions about this incident. N is a verified user with an introduction “the CCP Taizhou City Propaganda Official (*xuanchuan ganbu*)” on Weibo. On May 10 he published a post which was commented on by 2,810 and reposted by 3,117. This post reads:

“Don’t let the NIMBY [Not In My Back Yard] block the construction. Today Yuhang people advocate NIMBY activities in order to obstruct the construction of the incineration plant, using violence. This is against the law, and deserves severe punishment. If everybody advocates NIMBY, how do we develop (*jianshe*), then?” (N, May 10, 2014)

As a government official, N used the moral language of “construction” and “development”, which are frequently used by the authority in recent decades and have become important language of the official discourse. A lot of the comments under N’s post were against him, with

some argued rationally, while others angrily called him names. Some commented: “How about constructing the plant in your backyard?”

Facing the large-scale protest and the huge public pressure, the government had to suspend construction in Yuhang. It seemed that the grassroots was successful in this battle. However, the construction of the plant wasn't terminated. Four months later, on September 12, the local government published an announcement online titled *The Accouchement Before the Approval of the Jiufeng Trash Incineration Power Plant in Yuhang*, which indicated that the construction plan was announced in order to guarantee the quality and transparency of their work, and that anyone who had disagreements must file written letters to them with their real names and contact information within 11 days (Shi 2014). The future of the trash incineration plant in Yuhang therefore remains unknown. The residents in Yuhang still need a new round of battle to strive for their rights.

Unlike the sanitation workers' triumph, in the Yuhang case, the Weibo discussion faced severe censorship. However, it did not stop netizens' heated discussion and expression on Weibo. Photos and screenshots can sometimes postpone the deletion of the posts. In addition, if the original post is removed, the reposts and comments of the repost still remain on the personal page of the person who reposted. The act of posting, and of deletion became an ongoing battle between the authority and the grassroots. Most importantly, compared to most newspapers and televisions, Internet platforms such as Weibo provide a crucial platform where the grassroots create their subjectivity and counter-narratives against the official discourses. Although these bottom-up expressions do not always lead to the direct triumph of the grassroots, they can still lead to more response and interaction with and from the authorities, and influence its decisions in the future.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

By conducting surveys and online ethnography, this study examined the following questions: which social actors use Weibo; how do they use Weibo to express themselves and discuss social issues; how do people connect to each other through the distribution of information on Weibo; how do Weibo discussions affect citizens' activism and state policy making; and how do social interactions on Weibo construct meanings and influence power relations between different social actors in Chinese society? The survey examined user habits on Weibo and general opinions of Chinese netizens toward the significance of the use of Weibo. The three ethnographic case studies then looked closer at how people use Weibo and how they talk about social issues on Weibo in three different incidents from a micro level. Drawing from the finding results of this study, this final chapter generalizes patterns and analyses meanings of Weibo communication.

5.1. The Private and Public Sphere

Fraser and Papacharissi both emphasized the importance of the private sphere in contributing to discourses in the public sphere. As we have discussed earlier, Fraser argued that Habermas' notion of the public sphere neglected the "private" interests of citizens, especially subordinated social groups. Papacharissi suggested that the online space provides an overlap of the private and public spheres. The Chinese online social media platform, Weibo, also provides a combination of private and the public spheres.

Weibo provides a private space for self-presentation, private social networking and individually-centered expressions of opinion and emotion. First, many people use Weibo to provide updated news about their daily life and socialize with friends. Our survey shows that

many people use Weibo primarily for social networking, following people that they know off-line, and paying attention to the daily off-line activities of friends. In addition, the three case studies indicate that expressions on Weibo essentially derive from self-interest: a wife's will for the fair judgment of her husband, the workers' appeals for fair wages and benefits, the residents' expectations for a safe living environment and their well-being. These can all be interpreted as desires for the autonomy to control one's private and public environment and to have the freedom of choice in power relations at work, in the community and in relations with the state. Through the activities of self-presentation and social networking, as well as the expressions of opinions in social and political discussions, Weibo users construct their social identities and seek their sense of social being in cyber space.

Weibo also provides a public space, which enables democratic communication and political participation. Compared with other social media platforms, such as Facebook, in which users engage more in private social networking, Weibo is a more public platform, as one's personal page, profile information, posts and comments are visible to all other users rather than only "friends". Moreover, individuals are connected through what Couldry, Livingstone and Markham called "mediated public connection" or what Castells called the "networked society"; expressions that derive from self-interest are therefore connected to the collective interests of different social groups, and private issues can lead to collective communication and actions about wider social issues such as class division, legal injustice, labor exploitation, environmental decay, political control, etc.

5.2. Creating Subjectivity

Weibo creates a platform in which people who are marginalized in Chinese society can

express their subjective views. Three decades of social transformation, which have emphasized neo-liberal economic development within a centralized state apparatus, has deepened social divisions based on class, gender, rural / urban origins and region, and has produced a stratified society with systemic discrimination toward the poor, the powerless, the working class and rural populations. Mass media often marginalize and objectify these subordinated social groups in their news frames. Due to the cheap cost and convenient access to the Internet, however, more and more people from the grassroots, such as the street vendor's wife in Northeastern China, the sanitation workers in Southeastern China and the rural environmental protesters in Eastern China, are now able to get on Weibo to tell their own stories and call out their demands.

The street vendor's wife Zhang Jing and the sanitation workers both created their Weibo accounts purposely for storytelling and protests online. They are using Weibo for the first time and are learning to make use of the technology to express their perspective on the injustice they face, to win public support and to mount a campaign to remedy the injustice. By creating Weibo accounts, uploading personalized profile pictures, filling out personal files and publishing posts, they construct their identities and subjectivities online:

“I am Zhang Jing from Shenyang who has come to Beijing for the case of Xia Junfeng. I appreciate the support and help of everybody. I will be strong and will never give up. Hope you continue supporting me. Thank you...” (Zhang Jing, May 13, 2011)

“We are sanitation workers in the University Town in the City of Guangzhou. We dedicate our youth and sweat silently to create a clean and comfortable environment.”(Profile Introduction of University Town Sanitation Workers)

The Chinese mass media often use the discriminatory term “migrant workers” (*nongmin gong*) to describe the once-rural working class as people who are ignorant and backward. In contrast, Zhang Jing presented herself as an ordinary mother and wife, who firmly believes in her husband; the sanitation workers presented themselves as virtuous workers who consistently make

contributions to the society by making the city clean and comfortable. On Weibo, they expressed their own needs and wills directly.

“I only have one appeal, which is to find the truth and seek a lawful judgment. Our family is poor but we were happy. It is the violence of *chengguan* that has destroyed our family. Now they are denying the fact that my husband was beaten first and that he was protecting himself. We refuse to accept the verdict.” (Zhang Jing, May 14, 2011)

“We want to return to work, every single one of us, we all want to go back to work.” (University Town Sanitation Workers, September 11)

These are the most direct demands of the people from the grassroots in China. Although often characterized as a “fragmented” space, Weibo’s 140-character limit allows those who are less “literate” and less savvy at writing long articles to tell their own stories and speak for themselves in shorter, simpler and more direct language. In these two cases, Zhang Jing and the sanitation workers thus became the epicenters of public discussions in the time and space of Weibo.

5.3. Creating the Culture of Resistance

Individuals’ participation in the discussions of these issues and incidents constructed their social identities and helped form a new kind of netizen-centered culture online. The activities of posting, reposting, commenting, interpretations, expression of opinions, attitudes, support, solidarity, dissent, criticism, satire, and emotions of sympathy and rage based on moral feelings, have all helped form the individual presentations of themselves and construct social identities online. These presentations and the construction of identities are the premises for the construction of the netizen-centered culture in the Chinese cyber space, the creation of counter-discourses, and the awakening of citizen consciousness in Chinese society.

In the three case studies, there are two types of participation: the first type is the participation of the environmental protesters, lawyers and student activists, who engaged in both

on-line and off-line protests; the second type is the participation of the writers, scholars, celebrities and average netizens, who primarily engaged in discussions online. The first type of participation is more focused on pushing for actions to remedy the specific problem, while the second type of communicative participation produces a longer-term social impact as it leads to the construction of new meanings, new social identities and new social claims. For example, one user commented at Zhang Jing's post.

“The judiciary is not fair but humanity is fair. Please believe civilians will have their day” (T, May 13, 2011).

Through the second type of communicative participation, Zhang Jing's storytelling became a symbol of the broader clash between street vendors and the *chengguan* officers, of legal injustice toward the powerless, and of the inequality between small potatoes and the powerful state institutions.

Therefore, Weibo provides a space for netizens to participate in political and social discussions, through which they construct social identity, create new meanings, raise consciousness and demand social remedies. The technology has enabled netizens to engage in new ways of communication: it has enabled storytelling and expressions of ordinary citizens, and has enabled them to connect to the outside world. The stories and emotions are told and expressed through the texts, embellished by language, pictures and emotional icons, and disseminated through the network of Weibo, in what Castells called “mass self-communication”, a horizontal way of communication on the Internet. These modes of storytelling and expression thus become materials for the construction of meanings in the time and space of Weibo.

Xia Junfeng's story about a specific case of inequality aroused sympathy toward the street vendor's wife and anger toward the government institutions among netizens, which further triggered the more extensive collective communication online. Therefore the story of the street

vendor Xia Junfeng and his family was transformed into a broader discussion about social issues and the expressions of emotions: some raised the more rational debates about inequalities in the legal process; some focused on the criticism toward the systemic violence and corruption of *chengguan* officers, government, and legal institutions; others focused on the individual story of Xia Junfeng as a hero; while still others transferred their emotions into simple support of the poor family.

Through the debates on the legal and social issues and the expression of emotions, netizens present their own opinions, tell their own stories, build their identities, create counter-discourses, and therefore the culture of netizen resistance is formed in the online space. The discourses created on Weibo sometimes challenge those created by the mainstream mass media. These counter-discourses thus lead to the empowerment of grassroots workers, street vendors and rural environmental protesters, by constructing meanings and cultures in the time and space of what Foucault called the “discursive field” of Weibo. The formation of the culture of resistance thus embodies the rise of civic awareness in China. Moral and emotions, typically sympathy toward the powerless and hatred toward the rich and powerful, in these cases, serve as the catalyst for collective communication and mobilizations, which could further bring about profound social change.

5.4. Creating Counter-Discourses

In China, different levels of state media operate in a stratified political structure. For example, as mentioned in the three case studies, the *People’s Daily* and China News Service are state-level party media that work directly under the central government’s Propaganda Department. The *Yangcheng Evening News*, mentioned in the sanitation workers’ case, is a party

newspaper at the local level, and is supervised by the city government of Guangzhou. State media, both at the central level and the local level, are regarded as “tongues of the party”. News frames examined from these state media in the three cases show that there is a tendency to minimize citizen protests and legitimize the government’s policies, actions and institutions in order to maintain political “stability”.

Therefore, the state media at all levels usually legitimize “public order” and demoralize or marginalize those who disturb it. Local level protests such as the sanitation workers’ strike was downgraded to a “disturbance” and “dispute” between the workers and the company. The terms “disturbance” and “dispute” not only minimize the incidents but also objectify the workers. In more severe cases, such as the Xia Jufeng case and the Yuhang anti-trash incineration protest, which have produced national level influence in the discursive space, the state media often criminalize the ones who threaten the “public order” such as the street vendor who killed the two *changguan* officers, and the protesters in Yuhang who obstructed the construction of the project. The Yuhang anti-trash incineration protest caused more severe Internet censorship from the government than the Xia Junfeng Case, for it has aroused large-scale off-line collective actions, which symbolize a more severe threat to the “stability” of the state. In both cases, state media also tried to dispel the incidents as “rumors”, and legitimized the actions of sentencing the vendor to death and the crackdown on the environmental protests.

Domestic commercial mass media are also constrained by state power to a degree, and are operated by elites who are not aware, nor mandated to represent the interests of grassroots. For instance, as a local commercial newspaper, *Southern Metropolis Daily* mentioned the sanitation workers’ dissatisfaction and their unequal situation, but did not mention the government’s operation in the incident. Further, the *Southern Metropolis Daily* wrote about the

“public interest”, emphasizing the impact of the strike on the city’s environment rather than the workers’ needs and interests. Foreign commercial media, such as the BBC, however, made use of the local environmental protest to criticize the Chinese political system in general, rather than emphasizing the interests and needs of the environmental protesters in rural China.

Weibo, however, provides a platform for more pluralistic voices and opinions to coexist, as presented in the three cases. In all three case studies, Weibo provides the space for what Fraser called “counter-publics”, or what He called the “private discourse universe” in China. As one of the most influential text-based social media platforms in China, Weibo provides a space for ordinary citizens to speak and communicate, and create counter-discourses in opposition to the “mainstream discourses” created by the mainstream mass media, including the domestic state media, domestic commercial media and foreign commercial and state media. Weibo has become a discursive space where numerous counter-publics have come into existence.

These counter-publics include parallel and interactive theme-based counter-publics which can be described as workers’ publics, environmental publics, food safety publics, feminist publics, anti-corruption publics, land rights publics, LGBT rights publics, anti-human tracking publics, etc. There are also specific incident-focused counter-publics, such as the Xia Junfeng Case public, the Guangzhou University Town sanitation worker strike public, and the Yuhang anti-trash incineration public. The first and the third incident were both ranked as “top hot topics” on Weibo.

It is important to note that the street vendor Xia Junfeng was not necessarily a hero, and the two *chengguan* officers were not necessarily evil people as many netizens have described. Yet the counter-publics formed during the discussion of Xia’s case enabled the formation of plural discourses and led to change in the power relations in the discursive field: the counter-

discourses now challenge the mainstream discourse created by the “tongues of the party”, and the bottom-up power is trying to balance the dominant power of the state.

Moreover, not all the netizens show full disagreement with the government. For example, sanitation workers in Guangzhou asked the government to help them in striving for their rights; in the Xia Junfeng Case, some netizens argued that Xia deserved death because he killed people; similarly, the Yuhang anti-trash incineration protest online, there were a number of netizens who supported the government’s decision in building the trash incineration plant. These opinions show that the state and citizens in China are not completely separated.

“As for this case, I firmly support the government. Hangzhou is a scenic city, the government won’t destroy it. Building trash plants is always a process of balancing different interests. The government can postpone, but won’t stop construction.” (A, May 11, 2014).

“Why not build at your home?” (a reply to A’s comment)

Such dialogue shows the antagonistic interaction between netizens. It presents the clash between the distinct values of two Weibo users: one preferred the ethics of “construction” and “development” and emphasized “collective” interests that are often preached by the state, while the other one valued citizens’ rights and interests. The dissent among netizens often causes debates and interactions on Weibo. Weibo therefore enables pluralistic expressions and interactions, which in Papacharissi’s sense, enhances democracy by enabling deliberation and dialogues.

Meanwhile, Weibo also helped form a degree of “consensus” among netizens. The counter-publics function to construct collective identities among people in similar situations and with similar interests, and people from the same social groups. For instance, by interacting with each other through the connections of the Internet, specifically through online activities of reposting, commenting, and creating hot topics, protesters in Yuhang made alliances with each

other, and thus empowered themselves. Similarly, through communication and interaction online, the sanitation workers in the University Town in Guangzhou also made alliances with other individual workers and workers' organizations all over the country. Their anger toward the unequal encounters formed what Sziarto and Leitner called the "affective ground" for the connections and constructions of solidarity and collective identities: a collective identity as residents and neighbors who firmly protect their environment, land and health from the government's operations; and a collective identity as the working class as opposed to the capitalist class who make profits by exploiting them. Weibo therefore provides a space for subordinated social groups to make their collective voice heard, and a space for what Jack Qiu called the "working class-ICT". Online, they build their unified collective identities and solidarities, to fight against those in power through what Gramsci called "the war of position" (Gramsci 1971, p. 206), the cultural struggle against hegemonic power in the society.

Civic communication on Weibo is constrained by Chinese state power through the mechanisms of Internet censorship, with the deletion of some content regarded as politically or culturally "inappropriate" and the activities of the fifty-cent party who continuously expand "positive" influence on the Internet. In spite of this, in a Chinese political and social context, compared with the mass media that are more severely controlled by the state and influenced by elites, Weibo is a freer space for citizen expression and communication. Therefore, compared to social media in other countries, social media in China have more potential as an alternative platform to enhance citizen empowerment by providing the space for the construction of multiple counter-publics.

5.5. “Citizen Journalism”

Mass media in China, as we have mentioned, often exercises a top-down way of discourse construction and power production. The Internet, however, enables citizens to report what they see and experience in daily life. The Internet thus provides an alternative source of information. Restrictions of media production create many limits on the legacy mass media of newspapers and television: the length of the articles and programs are very limited; some facts are ignored and not covered due to political and commercial interests; and the mass media production process is slower. Citizens’ exposure of incidents online, however, can provide a faster way of news reporting from grassroot perspectives. Through citizens’ exposure online, government affairs and corporate operations thus become more visible to citizens. This visibility thus empowers netizens and enables them to supervise civic affairs. For example, by using mobile phones, the sanitation workers were able to expose and criticize the behaviors of the company leaders at first hand,

“The company leaders are still playing with us and cheating us, and not replying to our reasonable appeals...” (University Town Sanitation Workers, August 25, 2014, 17:25)

Moreover, as we have shown, the sanitation workers published “long posts” after each round of negotiations with the company, to expose the details of the negotiation, the attitudes of the company leaders and the responses of the workers. This then produced public pressure on the local government and the state-owned company and contributed to the final success of the workers. Similarly, in the Yuhang anti-trash incineration protest, residents in Yuhang posted first-hand information on Weibo,

“[The government] is constructing the largest trash incineration plant in Zhongtai, Yuhang! Now there are ten thousand protesters! Many died 🙏! [I] don’t want this beautiful place to become a city of poisonous gas!” (Z, May 10, 2014)

“#Hangzhou Yuhang People Continuing Protesting# On May 11 night, Yuhang District, Zhejiang Province, large numbers of middle school students went on the street in spite of the rain, protesting against the corrupted officials’ construction of the incineration plant and the crackdown on villagers. On 12, all the shops in Yuhang voluntarily closed down and [shop owners] started to protest, and clashed with the police. The citizens say that in the 5.10 Zhongtai Incident, villagers were killed and injured by the police, the government owes people an apology and a reasonable explanation.” (Q, May 12, 2014)

In the Yuhang anti-trash incineration protest, the lack of news reports from the mass media was well complemented by such news reports from netizens on Weibo. Although some of these messages were later deleted, they were still exposed to the public and read by a lot of netizens. These public exposures of the incident produced significant pressure on the government, and led to its final responses to the residents.

5.6. The Role of Opinion Leaders

Writers, scholars, journalists and lawyers sometimes act as opinion leaders in the cases that we have shown. Our distribution maps of the posts show that opinion leaders and media are often important nodes in the dissemination of posts. Moreover, the posts of opinion leaders often gain more comments and reposts. In the three case studies, opinion leaders such as Li Chengpeng, Wang Jiansong and Fan Zhongxin play important roles in the online protests. These people are often labeled as *gongzhi*, a short form for “*gonggong zhishi fenzi*” which means “public intellectuals”. With higher educational levels and often a special talent in using humorous language, *gongzhi* are often skilled in expressing their thoughtful opinions and criticisms on social and political issues. Like many other netizens, intellectuals’ speeches and debates on Weibo are also triggered by their values and emotions, typically a sympathy toward the powerless. The difference between intellectuals and ordinary citizens lies in intellectuals’ grasp of more powerful language and theatrical frameworks to debate social issues, and therefore their

arguments and descriptions can be more analytical, drawing from a wider base of Chinese history and theory, more reasonable and vivid. These people therefore become more influential in forming the discourses in cyber space.

The three intellectuals mentioned above come from different backgrounds which shaped their opinions. Li Chengpeng is a well-known liberal journalist and writer in China who frequently comments on politics. Li described Xia Junfeng as a father and a hero against the authority. For Li, Xia's death was a tragedy of the authoritarian governance of Chinese government. Wang Jiangsong is a left-wing scholar who emphasizes class inequality and frequently pays attention to unfair treatment towards workers. In the sanitation workers' case, Wang described the workers' situation and repeated what the workers said in their post.

“@ University Town Sanitation Workers, at 3 pm this afternoon, over 200 sanitation workers went to the office of the property company at the North Commercial Center of the University Town in Guangzhou, to wait for the response to their appeal to the reasonable resettlement caused by the termination of the company's construction contract. All the workers are demanding to continue to work in University Town, and recover their rights and interests. The company officials are still playing with us and cheating us, and not replying to our reasonable appeals...” (Wang Jiangsong, August 25, 2014)

In addition, when the workers described the company's division into local and non-local workers as revenge for their actions, Wang Jiangsong argued that, instead, the company's motivation was not revenge, but greater profits. Compared to the workers, Wang was able to see beyond the specific struggle to a larger view of the situation of the workers. Wang's comments show his criticisms about inequity in the capitalist production process.

Fan Zhongxin is a legal scholar, and a resident who lives close to the site of the trash incineration plant.

“Constructing an incineration plant was supposed to be an environmental project, and it makes sense for the government to do so. But forcibly doing it without environmental assessment, and hearing from the public is problematic. The armless

people were presenting petitions peacefully. Is sending the armed police, arresting and beating people, and deterring them by bloody violence the only way? In such a project that is associated with the health of five hundred thousand people, why not implement deliberative democracy, the spirit of the 18th congress of CCP?" (Fan Zhongxin, May 10, 2014)

As a local resident, Fan naturally defended the residents' opposition to the government's operation. Therefore, by expressing their opinions and adding their analysis, intellectuals also construct new discourses and identities online.

In Chinese cyber space, the activities of intellectuals play crucial roles in forming a culture of criticism and resistance toward the authorities. Intellectuals on Weibo produce double-sided effects. On the one hand, they are an important force to form counter-discourses and the culture of resistance against government power. On the other hand, some of their interpretations of the issues may form elite-centered discourses that conceal or marginalize grassroots interests and voices. For example, currently, the most prevalent discourse among opinion leaders is the discourse of liberal democracy. Some of these intellectuals are labeled as the "U.S.-cent party" (*meifen dang*), especially by the nationalists. The "U.S.-cent party" is a term counter to the "fifty-cent party", and symbolizes people who often preach pro-liberal speech, as influenced by Western values. Some opinions of these opinion leaders, especially the radical dissidents against the authorities, are likely to be censored. Therefore, opinion leaders with different political views have the potential to help bring focus to issues of social justice or to undermine bottom-up voices, yet the coexistence and interaction of different opinions are the premises for democratic communications.

5.7. The Role of Celebrities

Couldry, Livingstone and Markham pointed out that celebrity culture is a factor that

undermines the “mediated public connection” and restricts citizen participation. As our survey shows, entertainment is the second major purpose of the use of Weibo, following private social networking. In the ethnographic study of the Xia Junfeng Case, we found that celebrities engage in the discussions in their own self-interest. For example, the actress Yi Nengjing did not want to discuss legal issues but focused on the family, the wife and son of Xia Junfeng. Her engagement aimed at presenting herself as a compassionate person. Zhang Jing’s story thus became the material for Yi’s self-marketing on Weibo. Celebrities play an essential role in the formation of the culture of entertainment and consumerism. The positive effect of the online activities of Yi Nengjing in this case was to bring the Zhang Jing and Xia Junfeng’s story to our attention. The negative effect of her activities was to transfer the issue of legal justice into a matter of charity, which would further strengthen the otherness of the street vendors, deepen the class divisions in the Chinese society, and inhibit any serious reform of government corruption or legal injustice.

5.8. Digital Divide

Fuchs, Papacharissi both indicated that democratic participation on the Web is largely constrained by the commercialization of the Internet, which reinforces the digital divide. Our study also shows that there is a divide of Weibo use in China, based especially on gender and regional differences. Data accessed from the reports of China Internet Network Information Center show no significant improvement in the divide between genders and regions in recent years, which remain major factors shaping the unequal demographic structure of the Chinese Internet.

Three decades of neo-liberal economic development has been accompanied by the reconstruction of the gender divide in China. The combination of neo-liberal practices and the traditional patriarchal gender roles has led to the re-feminization and subordination of women.

Our statistics show that the Chinese cyber world, including Weibo, is a male-dominated space, as the majority of Internet users and Weibo users are male. Gender roles also influence what topics one is interested in, and what opinions are presented. The survey shows that gender roles influenced the participants' attitudes toward democracy and the social impact of Weibo, while other demographic features, such as age, income level and educational level did not have obvious correlations with the results of these questions. Females tended to be more positive about the influence of Weibo discussions on social issues, free expression on Weibo and Weibo's role in increasing democracy, while males held a comparatively more negative view toward these questions.

As the data accessed from Weibo Data show, the majority of people who engaged in the discussion of the Xia Junfeng Case and the Yuhang anti-trash incineration case were males. Moreover, the study of the Xia Junfeng Case shows that there were comparatively more females who talked about "Zhang Jing", the wife, than females who talked about the husband "Xia Junfeng". This shows the fact that men tend to focus more on the issues of legal and social justice, while women tend to pay more attention to the livelihood of the family of Xia, which reflects socially constructed gender roles of women paying more attention to domestic issues while men are supposed to discuss what are considered the more "public" social and political issues.

Regional differences are also apparent on Weibo. As the data accessed from Weibo Data show, the majority of people who engaged in the discussions of the Xia Junfeng Case and the Yuhang anti-trash incineration case were from the cities along the eastern coast of China, where people are richer on average, due to the Chinese government's implementation in the late 1970s of the "Reform and Opening" policy, which "allow some of people to become rich first". The

uneven wealth distribution between the east and the west, and the urban and rural areas of China thus has created unequal access to the Internet and has become a constraint for citizens' online communication and participation.

5.9. State Control

While Weibo provides a space for counter-publics that potentially brings citizen empowerment, it also provides a space for the state to exercise top-down political control. Zombies, official accounts of government institutions and staffs, and the deletions of contents are three major mechanisms of political control on Weibo. The exercise of the three mechanisms aims at maintaining the mainstream discourses propagated by the state and strengthening its power. However, the Chinese cyber world is far from what J. Liu characterized as a regime of "new authoritarianism".

As we have shown in the case studies, state media such as *People's Daily*, state institutions such as the Yuhang government, and government officials such as N are typical official accounts of government institutions and staff that are on Weibo. These official accounts, along with the zombies who frequently comment under the official accounts have persistently preached the government's agenda and produced the top-down influences online. One consequence is the emergence of the numerous "self-employed fifty-cent party" (*zi gan wu*), those who voluntarily refute "rumors" targeted at the state and accuse people with more "liberal" views as "betraying the country".

In spite of the political control, our survey result shows that the majority of people believe that expression on Weibo is free, Weibo has produced a big influence on Chinese society, and the use of Weibo has increased democracy. Participants answered that the reason that Weibo

increases, reduces, or has no influence on democracy lies in the dimensions of freedom of expression, public supervision, information source, transparency, accessibility, speed and range, and rumor spreading. Most participants indicated that Weibo influences them by providing a platform for hearing and expressing multiple opinions, and a platform for participants to engage in the discussions of political and social issues, as educational issues, food safety and environmental issues are the three social issues that participants follow the most.

Our literature review has shown that some scholars have focused on the state's control of social media in China, while some others have emphasized the capacities of citizens in bringing change. I argue that whether there is more top-down discursive control or there is more bottom-up participation depends on the themes of the cases. In some cases, Weibo mainly serves as a platform for the state to propagate and form nationalist attitudes among netizens through a top-down way of communication. As the survey shows, cases that engage in issues of sovereignty of the state, such as the Xinjiang and Kunming "terrorist" attack incidents, are more likely to arouse nationalist sentiment on Weibo. As we examined from the case studies, issues that engage in domestic structural inequality and netizens' self-interest, such as legal justice, class divisions, environmental issues, corruptions and gender inequality, are more likely to cause bottom-up communication that create counter-discourses.

Moreover, the possibility of the deletion of posts depends on what level these messages are considered to threaten the "stability" of the state. Specifically, radical collective expressions that link with big-scale collective actions, such as the Yuhang anti-trash incineration protest, are more likely to be censored. Individual expressions with criticisms and dissatisfactions toward the government but do not link directly to collective actions are less likely to be censored. The Xia Junfeng Case engaged in the injustice of the individual street vendor, and was less likely to

arouse collective actions, and therefore more criticisms were allowed on Weibo. The sanitation workers' protest was only at the local level and had less influence on Weibo, and therefore caused little if any top-down state intervention.

Netizens have also created various ways to avoid and “fight against” the state’s political control. First of all, the state censorship cannot delete all the “sensitive” messages because they are continuously produced by people, and some messages are exposed for a short time before being deleted, forming what Rauchfleisch and Schäfer identified as the “short-term public sphere”. Second, the actions of deletion and the “fifty-cent party” are visible to netizens, for the posts are already read by the netizens, and the reposts are not fully deleted on the reposters’ personal pages. The way to name the “fifty-cent party” is also a symbolic form of resistance. Third, some debates and arguments appear in the comments, which are less likely to be detected through the filtering of sensitive words. Fourth, the language choices of netizens affects whether the posts are deleted or not. Smart use of language, sometimes encoded, indirect and humorous language, can often avoid the filtering of “sensitive” words. Fifth, the deletions of posts, which symbolize the exercise of the top-down state power on citizens, often further trigger the anger among netizens and thus activate stronger counter-power that lead to resistance. The interplay of power is therefore multidimensional on the Internet, as Castells has suggested. One example of this is that the government officials and institutions are often severely criticized by netizens.

Therefore, Weibo has become a discursive “battle ground” between the grassroots and the state, and between different social actors: the grassroots, the state, the commercial profit maker, celebrities, opinion leaders, etc. As operated by the private corporation, Sina Weibo is double-sided. On the one other hand, Sina Weibo has to cooperate with the state in censoring posts. On the other hand, as a commercial social media platform that works with the advertising

model, even though Sina has to obey the rules of the government, it still has an interest in keeping the platform pluralistic enough to cater to users.

5.10. Effectiveness of Bottom-Up Communication

Off-line, the grassroots in China rarely have had the opportunity to have equal dialogues with government officials who sit in the high office buildings, due to the centralized political structure. The layout of cities and of government buildings symbolizes the power of the state in everyday life. However, in cyberspace, the layout of the webpages and the influence of a user aren't necessarily decided by one's political resource or social capital in real life. Jobs, ages, gender and social status aren't so decisive on Weibo. Government officials and grassroots are therefore more equal to have dialogues online. For example, as we have shown in the case studies, the local government official N, the official account of the local government Yuhang Release, and the national level party media *People's Daily* have all received severe criticisms from netizens on Weibo, regardless of the fact that they might have hired staff to post positive comments. As for N, some netizens suggested building the trash incineration plant at his backyard. Such criticisms would almost be impossible to happen off-line. Weibo thus empowers the netizens who use them and enables the government to hear the public opinions from the bottom.

Our three cases dealt with different government institutions and social actors in Chinese society, and they each symbolize different types of social issues. Specifically, the street vendor Xia Jufeng's case engaged in the dissatisfaction with the administrative enforcement of the City Urban Administrative and Law Enforcement Bureaus at local level and the court at provincial level; the sanitation workers' case engaged the capital power and the state-operated trade union

at local level; the Yuhang environmental protest engaged in environmental and development departments of the local government as well as the police force.

The expressions of sanitation workers, student activists and professors in Guangzhou University Town created public pressure on the local government. Along with their consistent off-line efforts, Weibo discussions finally contributed to the success of the workers. The success of their strike was an uneasy task, and the negotiating was a long process. The workers experienced many twists and turns before obtaining the final success, for they were negotiating with the powerful capital power and the local government institutions. In addition, the company leaders also used tactical ways in their negotiations with the workers. For example, they tried to keep the local workers and made the non-local workers on wait. Such actions were regarded by the workers as an action to divide them intentionally for revenge. However, because of their solidarity and their consistent negotiation, workers were able to win the battle.

The discussions on Weibo did not change the final judgment of the Xia Junfeng Case, and one of the reasons is that there was little if any off-line activities throughout the protest. As an individual case, Xia's case did not cause off-line collective actions, which would produce more pressures on the authorities. However, it has created profound symbolic meanings: Xia Junfeng has become a symbol for the unequal and unlawful treatment towards street vendors by the *chengguan* officers. This symbolization has triggered further discussions and expressions about issues of social inequalities on Weibo.

The anti-trash incineration protest in Yuhang, as well, for many citizens and netizens, symbolizes the clash between the state's agenda in the economic development and the well-being of the citizens. The Yuhang protest shows that Chinese governments also use increasingly tactical ways to deal with protesters: the Yuhang government announced that disagreements were

allowed but they shall be filed to them in very restricted ways within restricted time. This response was the attempt to excise its control through what Foucault called “governmentality”, the non-violent management of the state through a range of multiform tactics” (Foucault 1991, p. 95). The Yuhang anti-trash incineration protest still need consistent strives from the rural residents.

The cyber space has become a discursive “battle ground” between the authorities and the grassroots, and between different social actors and different discourses. The effectiveness of citizen communications also lies in their use of different communication techniques and action repertoires: what language they use, how they approach audiences, and how they combine online protests with off-line activities. In our case studies, some discussions online were closely linked to protests and activism off-line, while some discussions tended to remain discursive. The different use of communication techniques and action repertoires led to different responses from the authorities. Citizen empowerment with the rise of civic consciousness with the help of communication online, may not cause direct reactions of the government immediately, but can gradually influence power relations in Chinese society.

5.11. Cyber Democracy?

As we have shown, Weibo is a complex social space due to the interplay of different forces and social actors on it: the working class, protesters and activists from the grassroots use it to mobilize protests and express their political demands, and reach to other people through the network of Weibo; opinion leaders such as writers, scholars, journalists and lawyers publish their speech on Weibo, and produce double-sided influence; ordinary citizens participate in the discussions of social and political issues and also express their political opinions; celebrities

engage in the discussions of the social issues mainly for their own interests; the state also tries to expand its influence on Weibo through the activities of the state media, government institutions, the “fifty-cent party”, and the deletion of certain contents that are considered as “sensitive”; the commercial interests of the Sina Corporation and advertisers create double-sided effects; gender and regional divisions create unequal access to the information; the majority of people use Weibo for the presentation of their daily life, private social networking, and entertainment, and most people use the fragmented time on Weibo.

To summarize, Internet platforms in China such as Weibo provide the space for bottom-up political participation: Weibo has expanded the horizontal discursive space where plural discourses coexist and interact; it provides a social sphere where counter-discourses are created; Weibo provides a space where the culture of resistance is formed; it also serves as an alternative source for information. Meanwhile, the vertical political control, the consumerist culture and the unequal access are the three major factors that constrain civic participation on Weibo.

The Internet platforms, including social media, are still at the initial stage of development, as we often call it the “new media”. In order to create more democratic practices and bring more profound social change in China through the use of social media, several suggestions should be taken into consideration. First, online citizen communication expand the discursive space, but citizens must combine the discursive activities with off-line activities. Second, in order to bridge the digital divide based on gender and region, we could come up with more innovative solutions for the “working-class ICT”, such as Internet cybercafés and cheaper mobile phones. Third, in the transformation of the society, there is development of consciousness of political participation among Chinese citizens, and it is important to continue to strengthen citizens’ consciousness of political participation.

Finally, to borrow the metaphor used by Jack Qiu, which compared cyberspace to a “new lab” for bottom-up participatory experiments, and social movements as a “test tube”, for “digitally networked action” or DNA: “Most experiments fail, but that’s what experiments do. But that’s okay, because you only need one test to host the experiment that changes the world” (J. Qiu et al. 2014, p. 1144). From this point of view, we have seen both success and failure in citizen communication on Weibo. Citizen empowerment is a long and uneasy process. It is the human agent rather than the technology that eventually can bring profound social change.

5.12. Significance and Future Study

This study examined how different social actors participate in social discussions on Weibo, and explained how these online interactions influence the effectiveness of citizens’ off-line activism, influence power relations, and produce profound impacts on the Chinese society. Specifically, the quantitative data collected from the online survey revealed general opinions and behaviors of Internet users, and the qualitative data collected from the three ethnographic case studies examined how online behaviors and narratives create and present identities and construct new cultures on social media.

Through three specific case studies which focus on situations of different social actors (street vendor, labors, and environmental protesters), this study presented features of three public spheres and examined the dynamics between different social forces being played on Weibo and the social impact it produces. By comparing Weibo discussions with discourses produced by other forms of media, this study helps us understand the features and roles of the Internet social media communications in a specific context of contemporary Chinese economic, social, cultural and political background.

This research has both theoretical and pragmatic significance. On the one hand, it contributes to the theories in the field of cyber communication and social change; it provides qualitative empirical data for the study about Chinese social media. On the other hand, this study will also affect the way we use social media as a communication tool and eventually produce more profound social impacts.

This study also has limitations. Because of the limitation of time, the participant observations of the three case studies mainly focused on examining the discussions and discourses online, and lack the data accessed from participating and observing off-line activities. Future studies could look more at the dynamics between on-line and off-line activities in social movements by combining participation observation on-line and off-line. Future studies could also look at features of other public spheres in Chinese social media regarding other themes, such as gender issues, food safety and corruption that are always heatedly discussed on Chinese social media by netizens. In addition, future studies could also examine the role of mobile social media, such as Wechat, and its relation to social change, as mobile phone social media platforms are rising in recent years.

Appendix A: Figures

Chapter 3

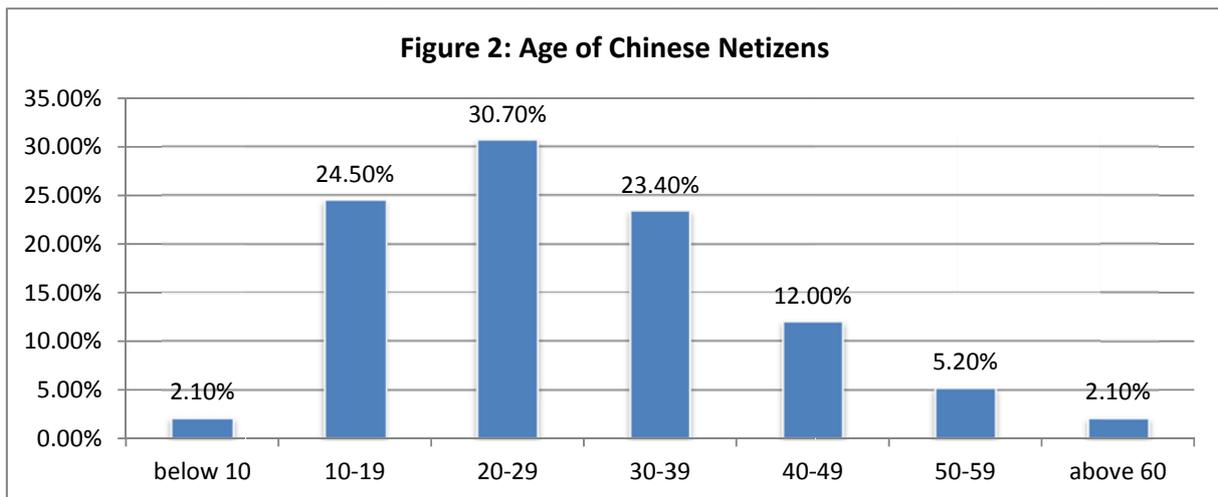
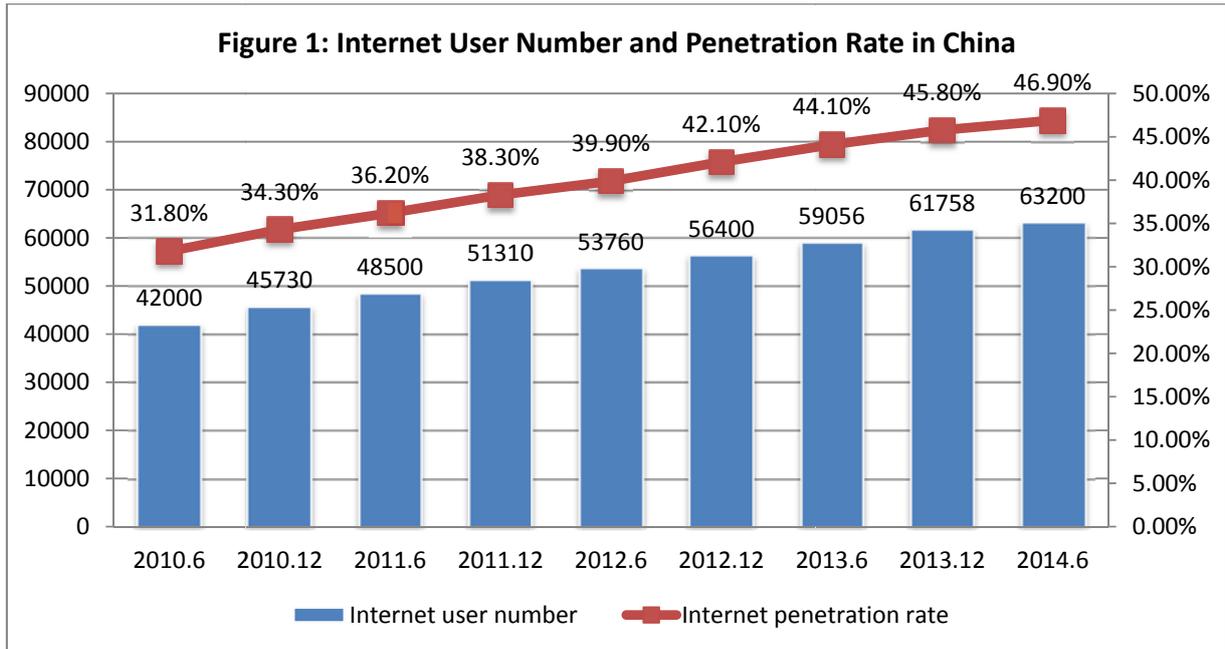


Figure 3: Educational Level of Chinese Netizens

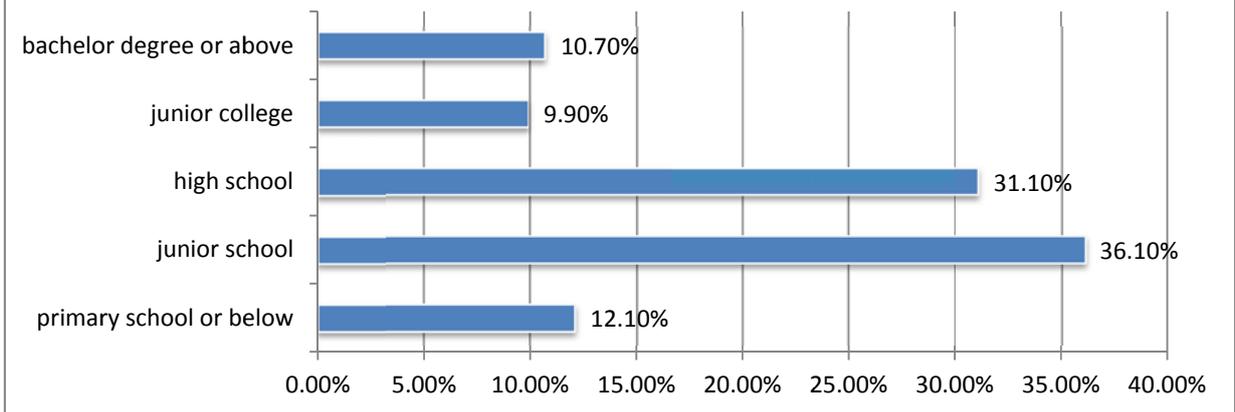
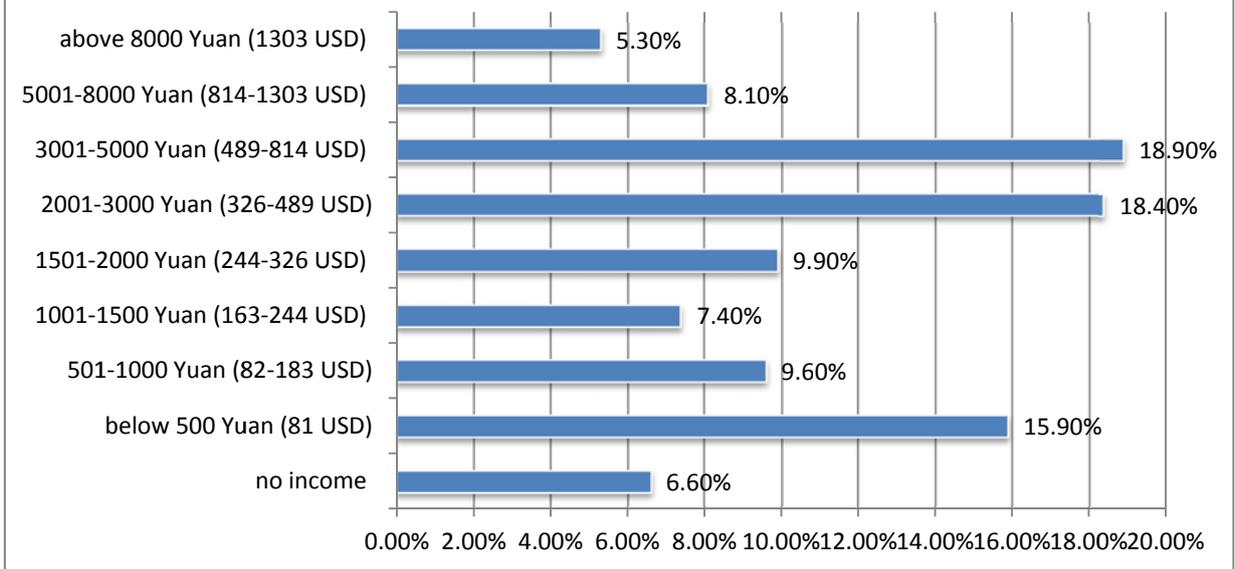


Figure 4: Income Level of Chinese Netizens



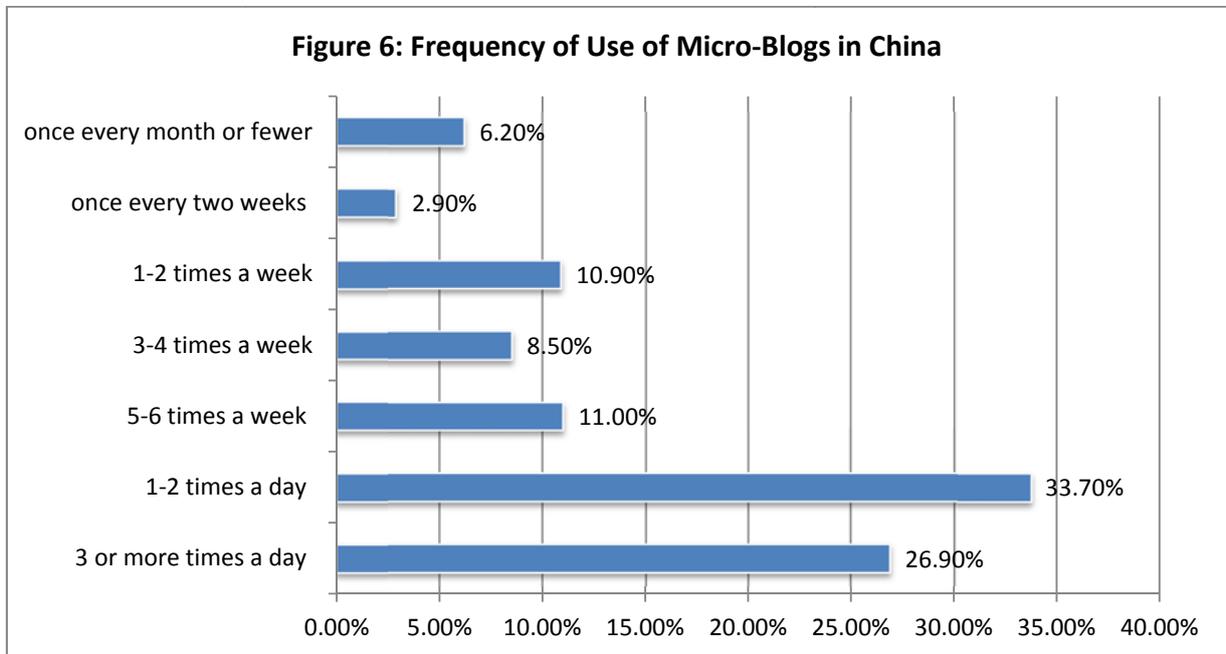
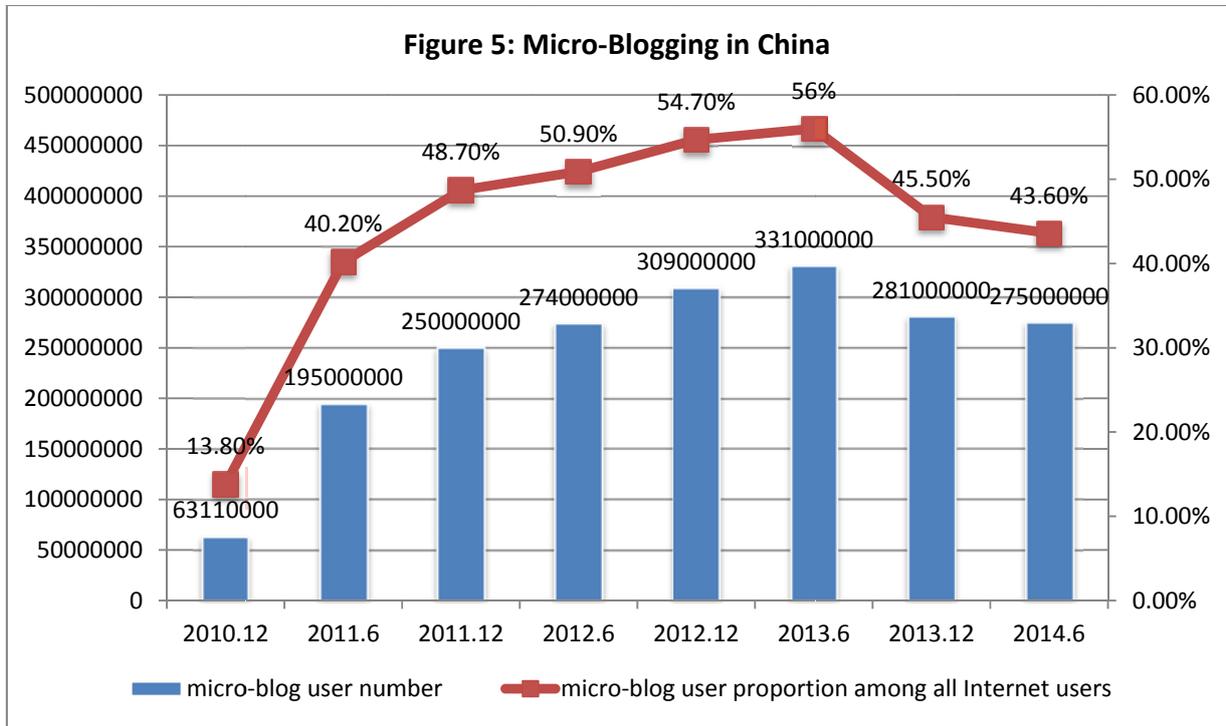


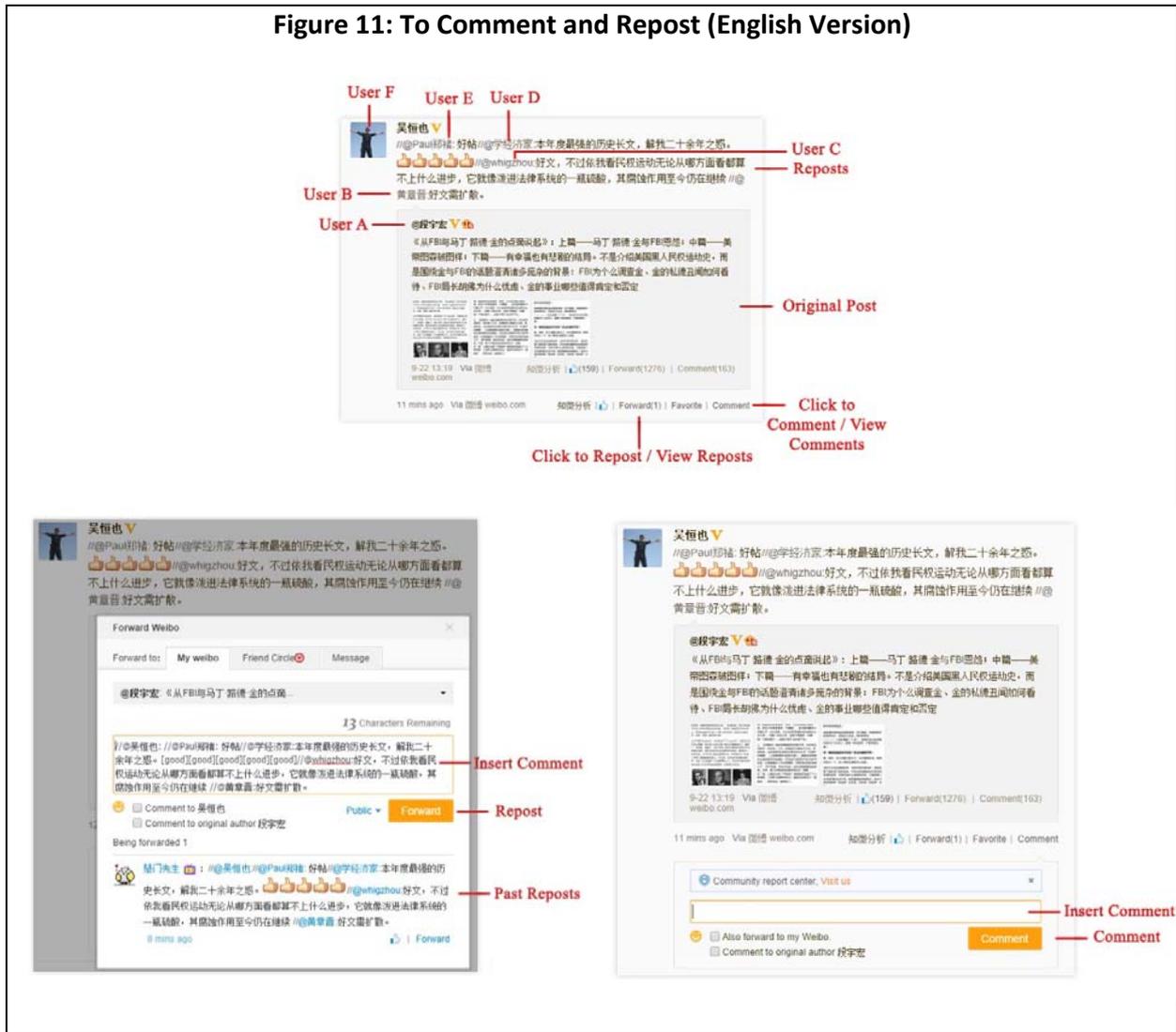
Figure 7: The Personal Page of a Verified User (English Version)



Figure 8: To Post on Weibo (English Version)



Figure 11: To Comment and Repost (English Version)



Chapter 5

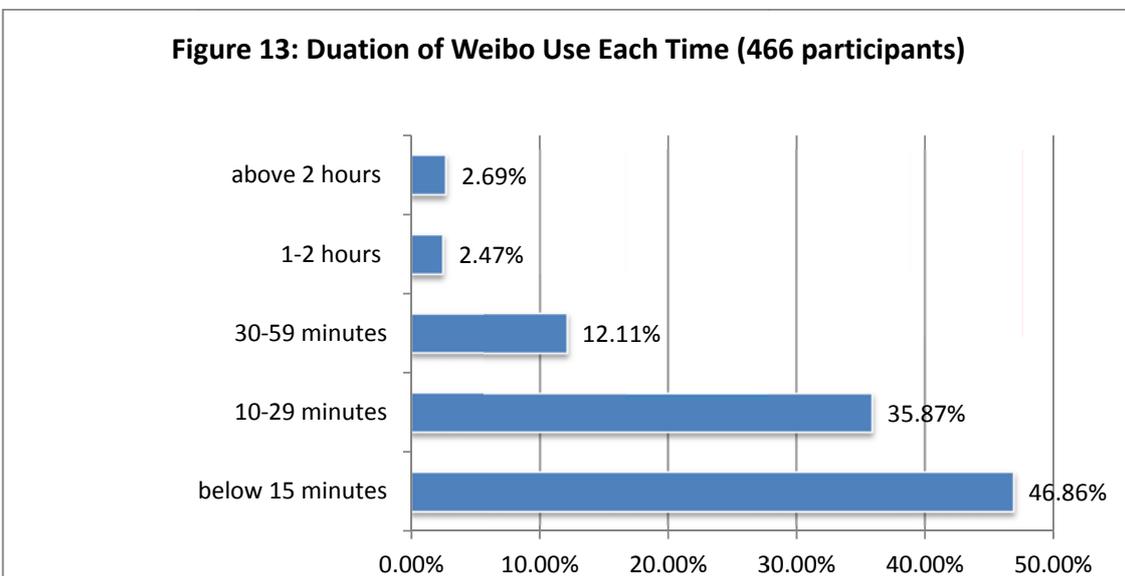
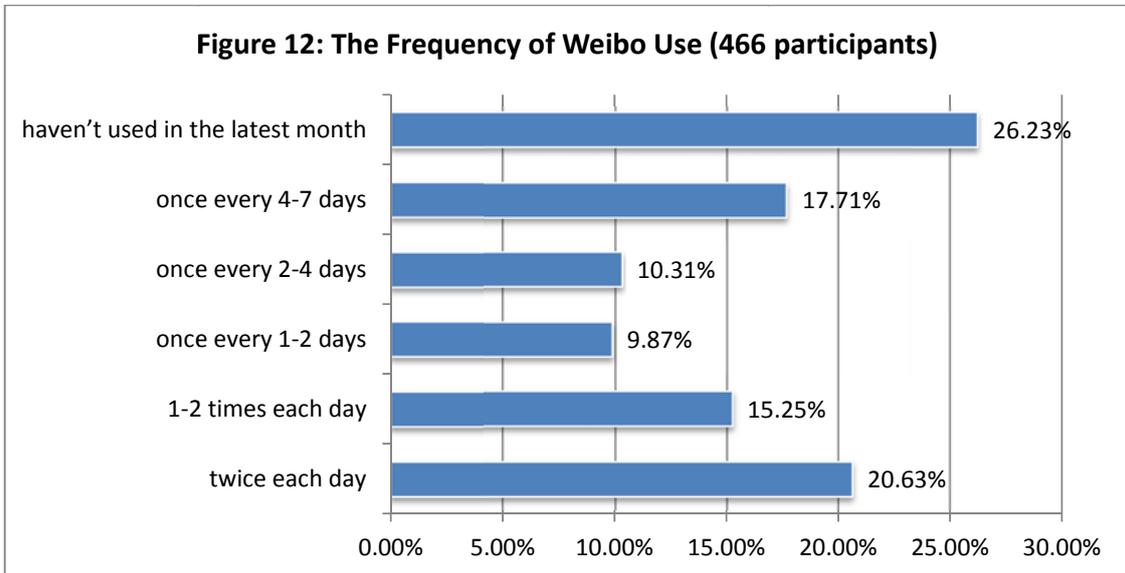


Figure 14: Who Do You Follow the Most on Weibo? (Multiple Choice) (466 Participants)

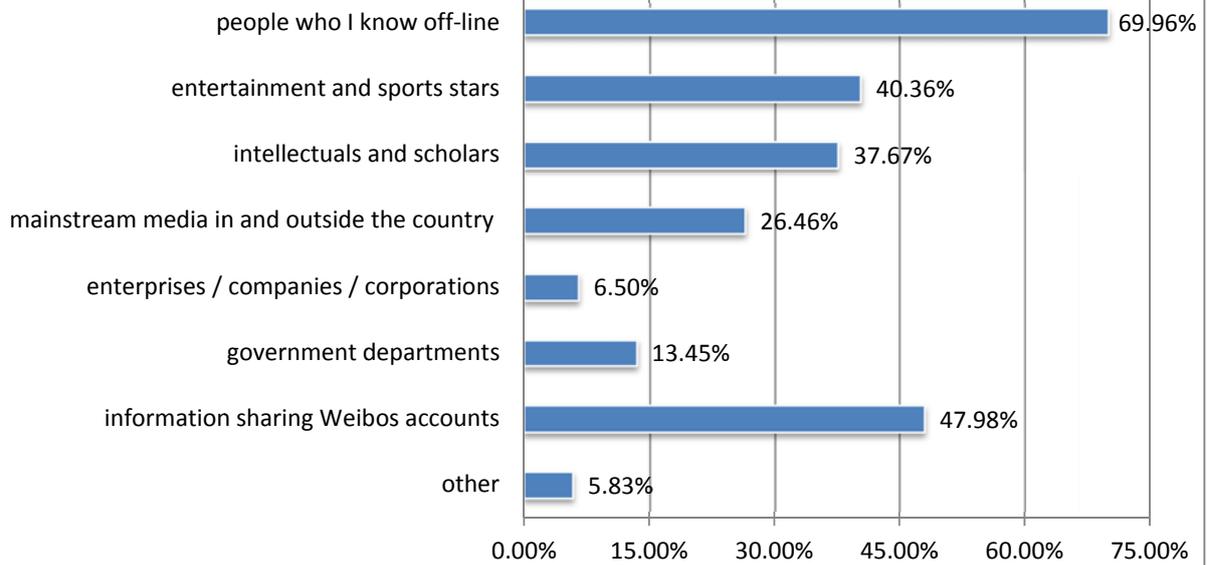


Figure 15: What Types of Weibo Posts Do You Follow and Repost the Most? (Multiple Choice) (466 Participants)

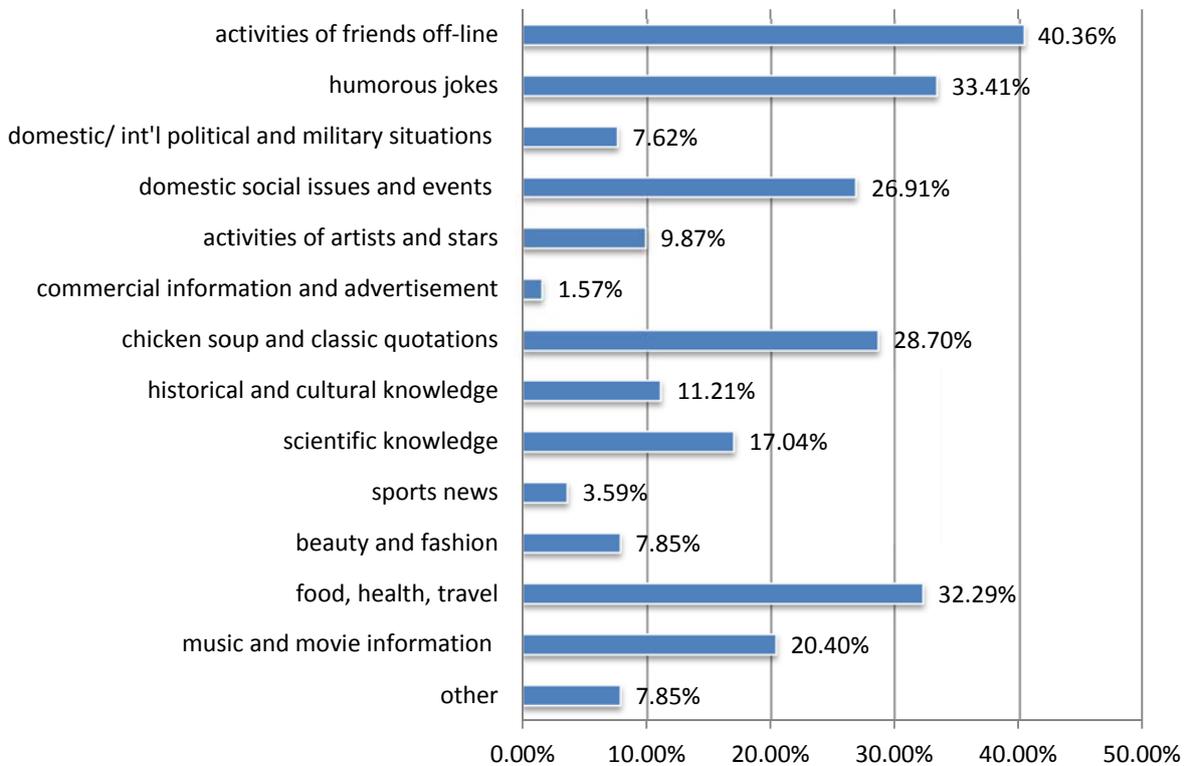


Figure 16: Influence of Weibo Discussions on Off-line Social Issues / Events (565 Participants)

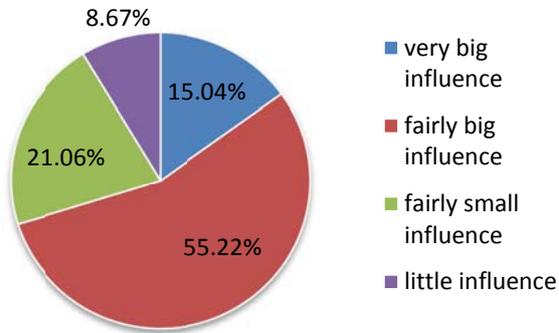


Figure 19: Influence of Weibo Discussions on Off-line Social Issues / Events (565 Participants)

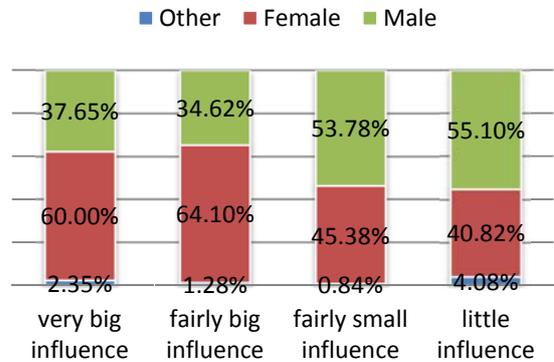


Figure 17: Freedom of Expression on Weibo (565 Participants)

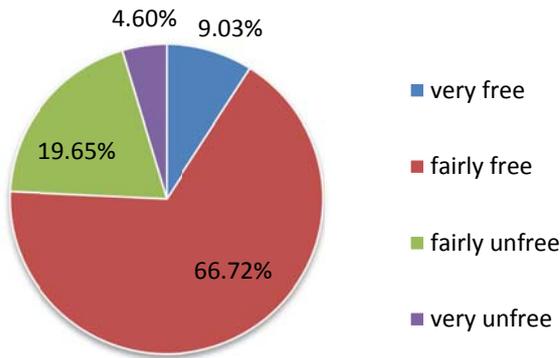


Figure 20: Freedom of Expression on Weibo (565 Participants)

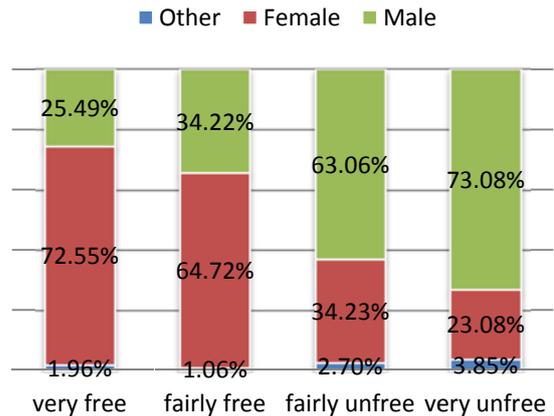


Figure 18: Relation between Use of Weibo and Democracy (565 participants)

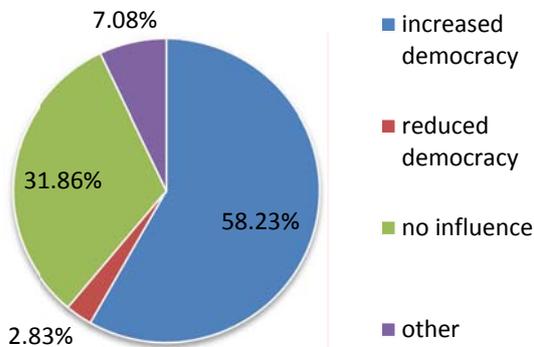


Figure 21: Relation between Use of Weibo and Democracy (565 participants)

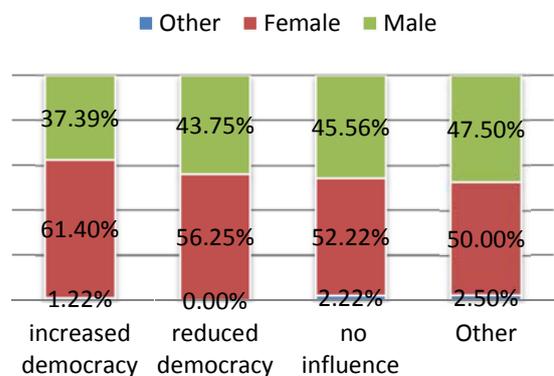


Figure 22 : Weibo's Influence on Participants (multiple choice) (565 Participants)

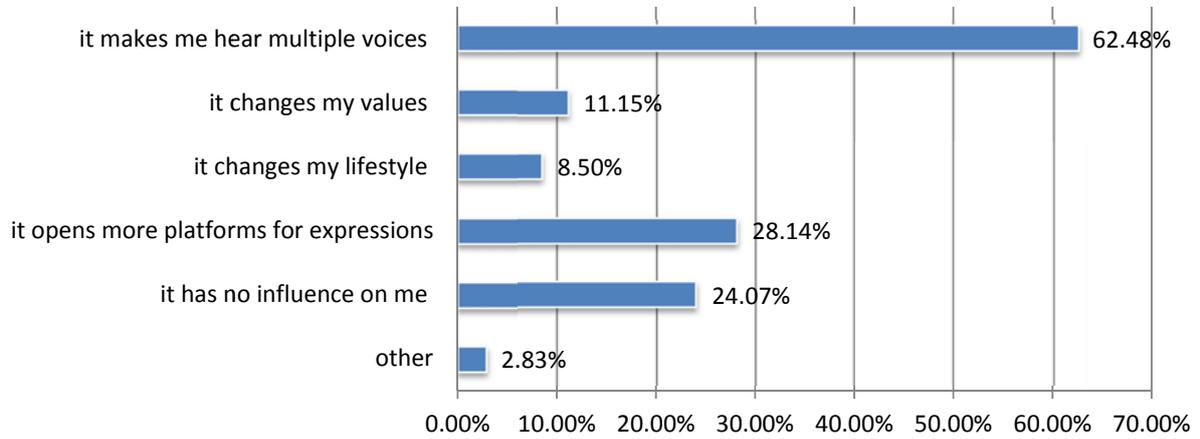


Figure 23: What Social Issues and Events Do You Often Comment and Repost? (Multiple Choice) (466 Participants)

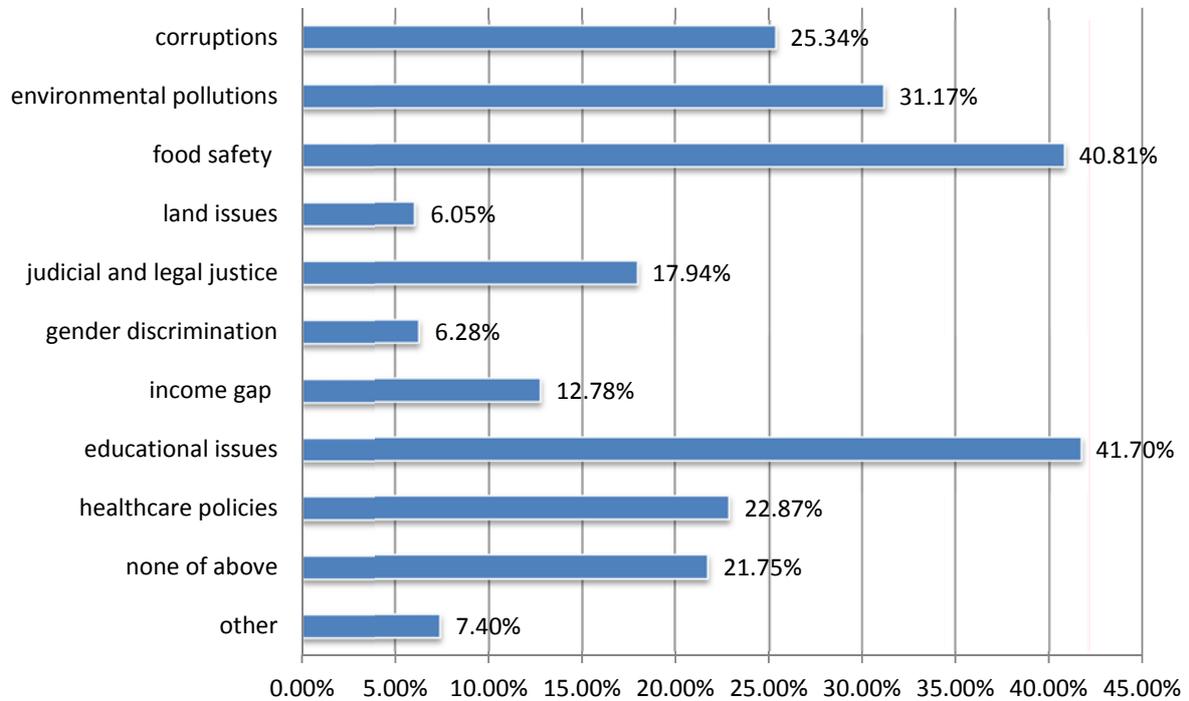


Figure 24: Location of Users Mentioning “Xia Junfeng” (Left) and “Zhang Jing” (Right) (Nov 11, 2013 -May 11, 2014)

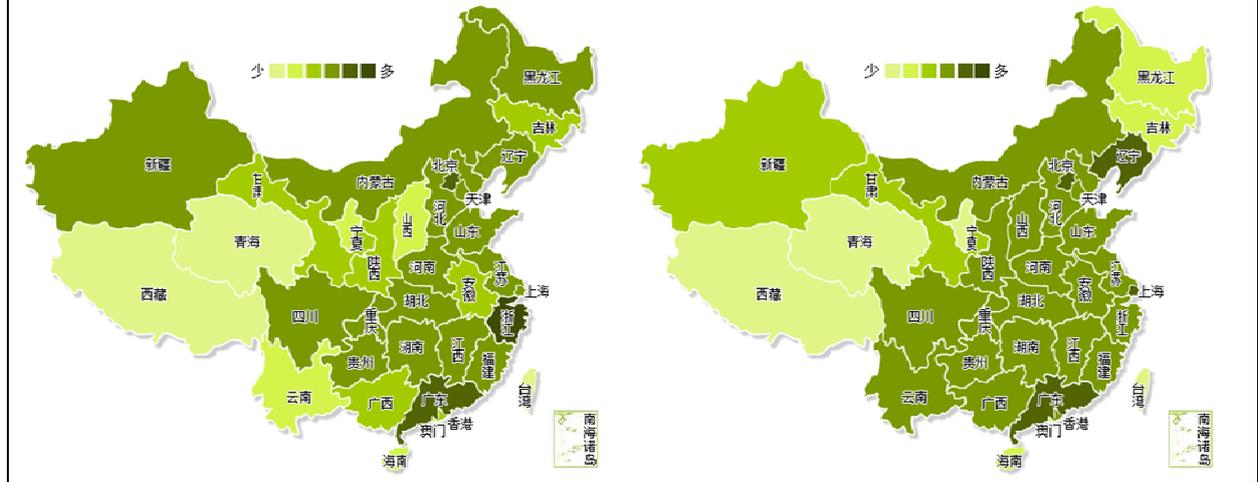


Figure 25: Hot Word Trend of “Xia Junfeng” and “Zhang Jing” (Jan 2013-Jan 2014)



Figure 26: Distribution Map of Zhang Jing's post on September 26, 2013 via Weibo Events (Ren et al. 2014) (Accessed October 18, 2014)

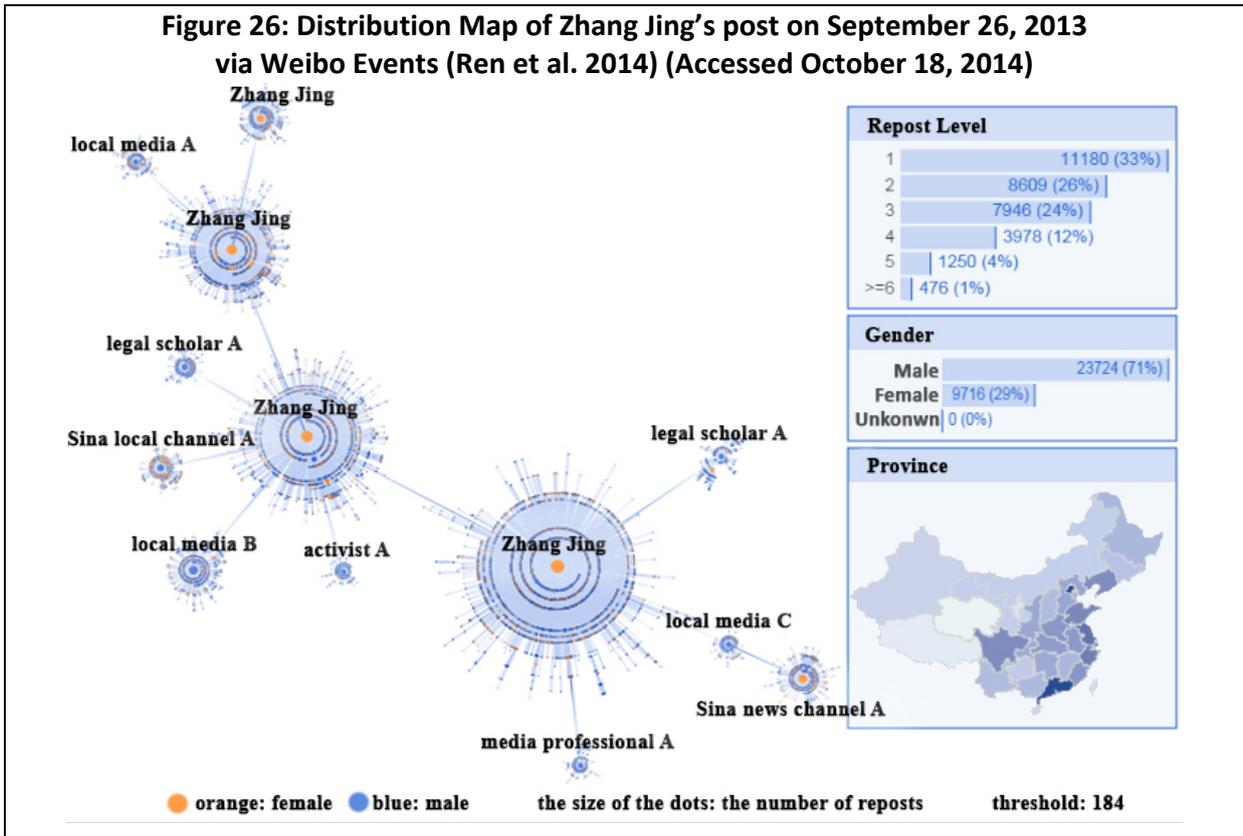


Figure 27: Distribution Map of Yi Nengjing's post on September 26, 2013 via Weibo Events (Ren et al. 2014) (Accessed October 18, 2014)

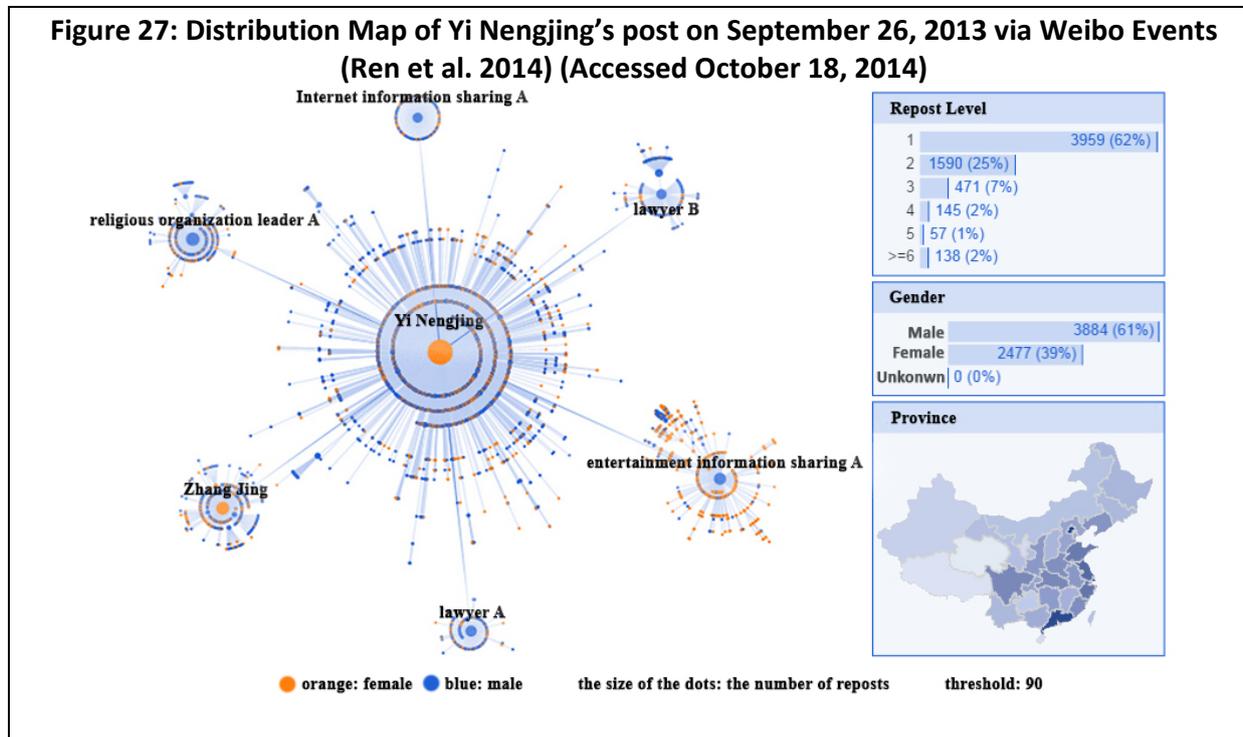


Figure 28: Distribution Map of the Post of *People's Daily* on October 1, 2013 via Weibo Events (Ren et al. 2014) (Accessed October 18, 2014)

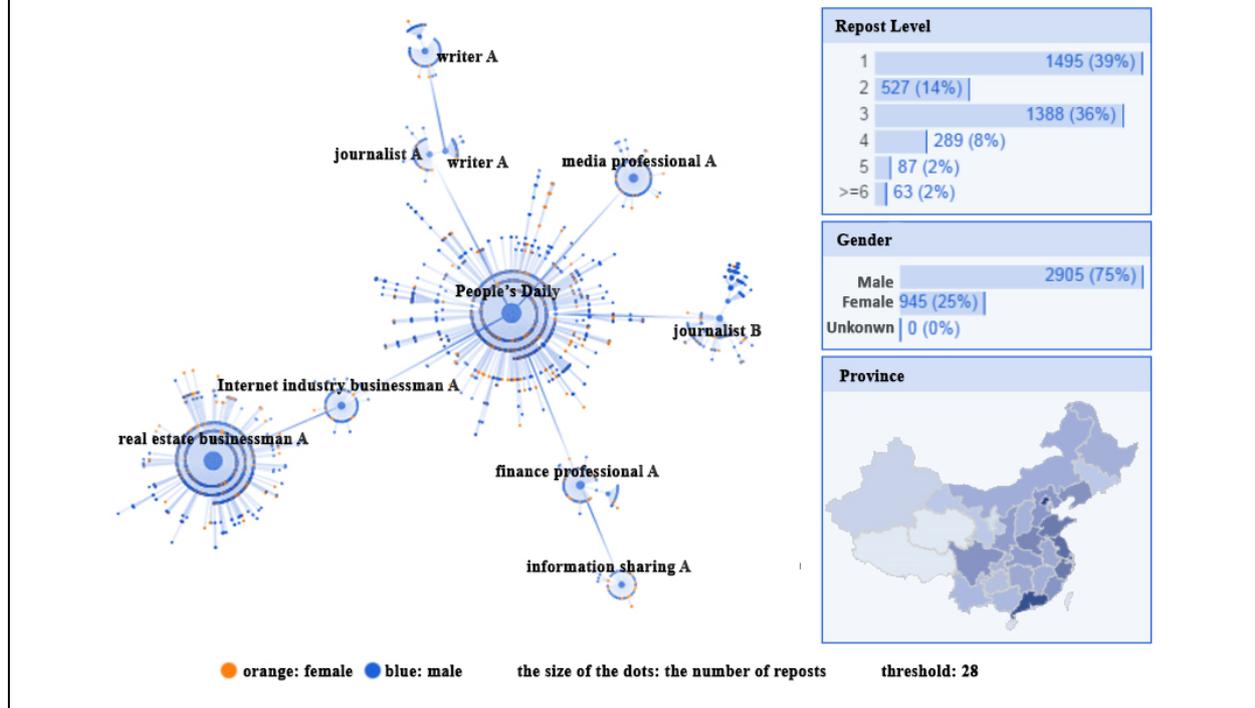


Figure 29: Distribution Map of the post of "University Sanitation Workers" on September 10, 2014 via Weibo Events (Ren et al. 2014) (Accessed October 18, 2014)

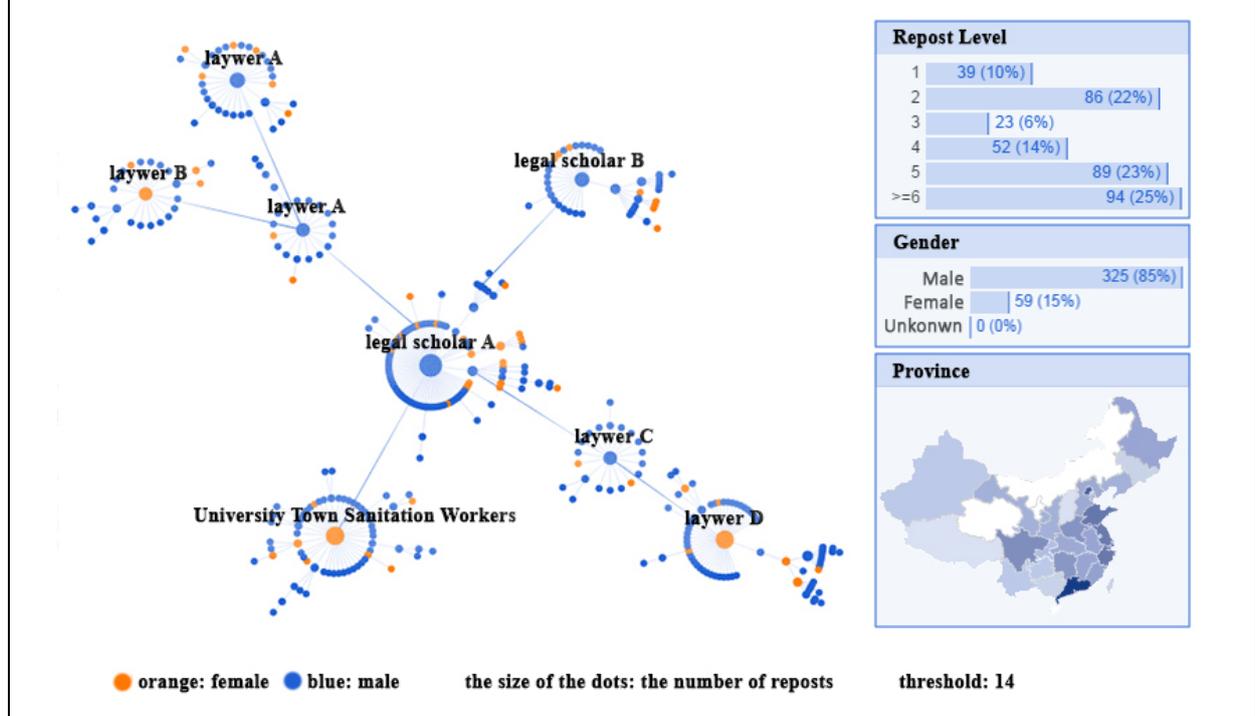


Figure 30: Hot Word Trend of “Yuhang” (April 1, 2014- October 1, 2014)

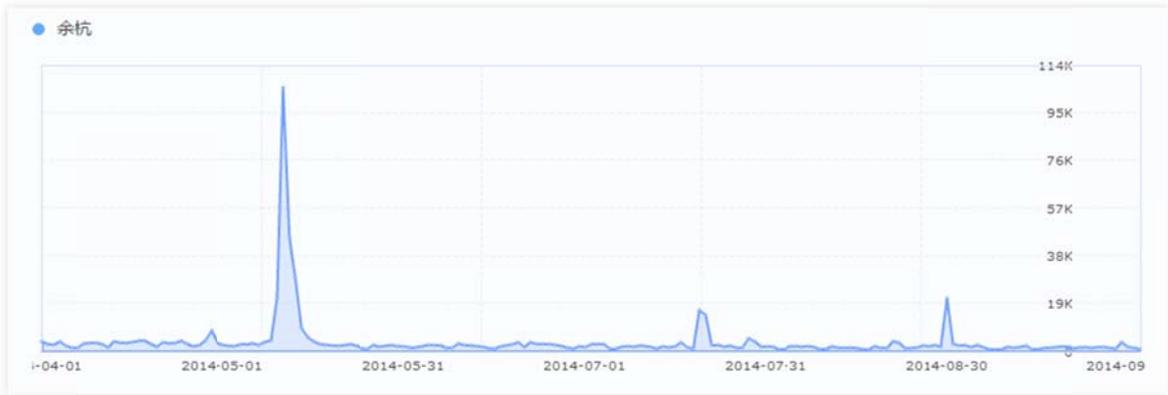


Figure 31: Location of Users Mentioning “Yuhang” (April 12, 2014-May 12, 2014)



Figure 32: Distribution Map of Fan Zhongxin's Post on May 10, 2014 via Weibo Events (Ren et al. 2014) (accessed October 18, 2014)

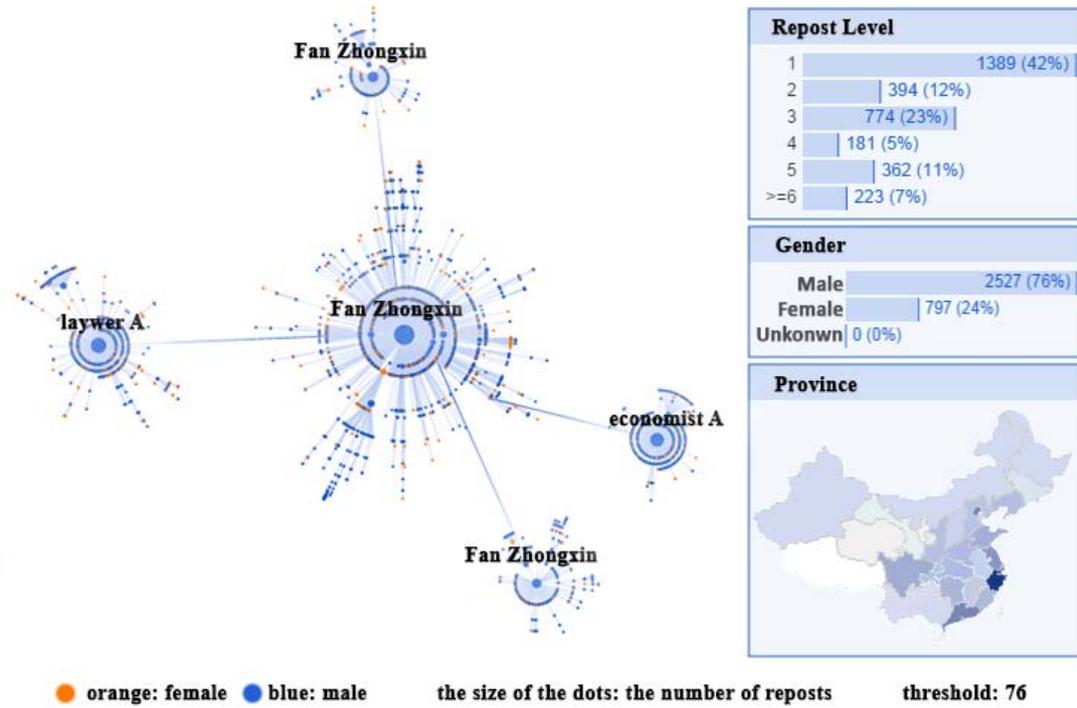
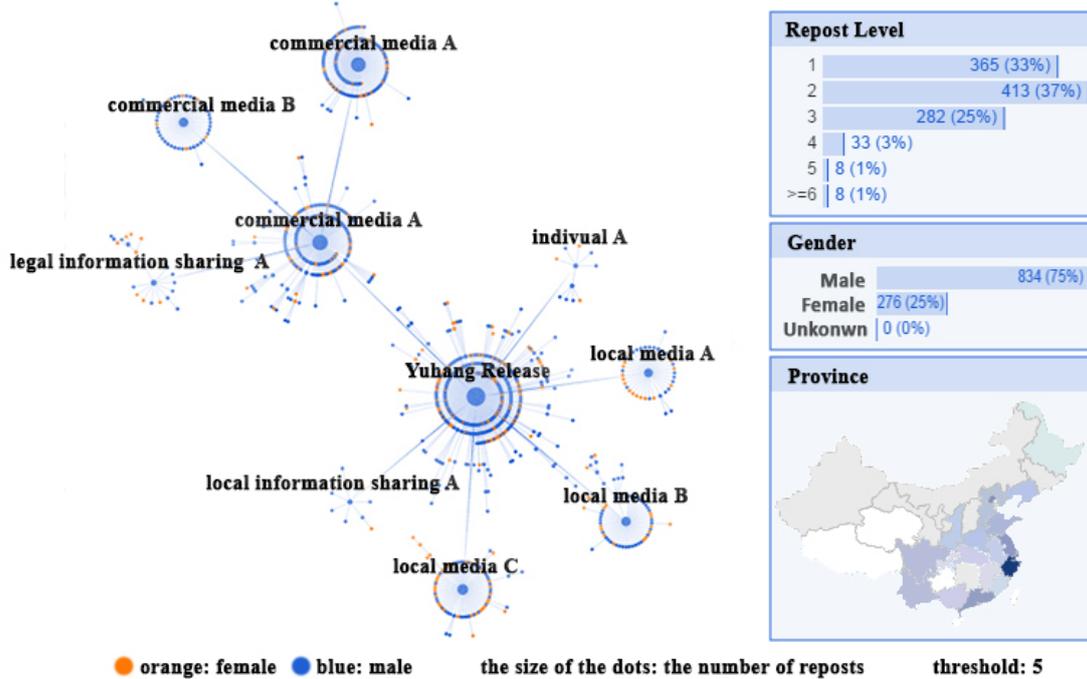


Figure 33: Distribution Map of the Post of Yuhang Release on May 9, 2014 Weibo Events (Ren et al. 2014) (accessed October 18, 2014)



Appendix B: Questionnaire

Original Chinese version

调查问卷：新浪微博的社会影响

您好！我是旧金山大学（University of San Francisco）国际研究（International Studies）专业的硕士研究生。我正在做一项关于中国的社交媒体和网络民主的学术研究，主要关注新浪微博的使用和其所带来的社会影响。这份调查问卷将问及您的上网习惯以及您对网络民主的观点。该问卷所收集的信息将被统计为宏观数据，从而运用于我的硕士论文。非常感谢您的参与和分享！

一、这一部分问题将了解您的使用新浪微博的习惯

1. 您拥有新浪微博的账号吗？(单选题)

- 有 (选此选项将跳至第 2 题) 没有 (选此选项将跳至第 8 题)

2. 在最近 1 个月内，您上新浪微博的次数和频率大概是 (单选题)

- 60 次以上（每天上 2 次以上） 30-60 次（每天上 1-2 次）
 15-29 次（每 1-2 天上 1 次） 8-14 次（每 2-4 天上一次）
 1-7 次（每 4-7 天上一次） 最近 1 个月都没有上新浪微博

3. 每次登陆新浪微博，您一般会上多久？(单选题)

- 15 分钟以下 10-29 分钟 30-59 分钟 1-2 小时 2 小时以上

4. 在微博上，您关注的比较多的是哪些人？(多选题)

- 生活中认识的人 演艺或体育明星 知识分子和文化名人
 国内外主流媒体的官方微博 企业的官方微博 政府部门的官方微博
 信息分享类微博（笑话、文摘、美容、服饰、美食、养生、旅游等等）
 其他(请填写) _____

5. 您经常评论和转发的微博是哪些类别？(多选题)

- 生活中好友的动态 幽默笑话 国内外政治军事局势
 国内社会问题和事件 演艺明星的动态 商业信息和广告
 心灵鸡汤经典语录 历史文化知识 科学知识
 体育新闻 美容服饰 美食、养生、旅游
 音乐、电影信息 其他（请填写） _____

6. 以下社会问题和社会事件哪些是您经常评论和转发的？(多选题)

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 贪污腐败现象 | <input type="checkbox"/> 环境污染问题 | <input type="checkbox"/> 食品安全问题 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 土地问题 | <input type="checkbox"/> 司法、执法公正 | <input type="checkbox"/> 性别歧视问题 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 收入差距问题 | <input type="checkbox"/> 教育问题 | <input type="checkbox"/> 医疗政策 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 以上都不是 | <input type="checkbox"/> 其他（请填写）_____ | |

7. 您最近通过新浪微博所关注、评论或转发的是哪一件社会问题或事件？您对此问题或事件的态度和立场是什么？(填空题)

二、此部分提问将了解您对微博的看法

8. 您认为新浪微博上的讨论对社会问题或社会事件的影响是(单选题)

- 有非常大的影响 有比较大的影响 有比较小的影响 没有什么影响

9. 您觉得通过新浪微博是否可以自由发表言论？(单选题)

- 非常自由 比较自由 比较受限制 非常受限制

10. 您觉得在中国，新浪微博的使用和民主的关系是(单选题)

- 推进了民主 减少了民主
 对民主没有什么影响 其他（请填写）_____

11. 根据上一题的回答，您觉得新浪微博的使用推进、减少民主，或者对民主没有影响的原因是(填空题)

12. 新浪微博的使用对您的影响(多选题)

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 让我听到了更多不同的声音 | <input type="checkbox"/> 使我的观念产生了改变 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 改变了我的生活方式 | <input type="checkbox"/> 增加了我表达意见的渠道 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 没有什么影响 | <input type="checkbox"/> 其他（请填写）_____ |

三、此部分提问将收集您的个人信息，这些信息将统计为数据

13. 您来自中国的哪个省（或自治区、直辖市）？(填空题)

14. 您的年龄(填空题)

15. 性别(单选题)

男 女 其他（请填写） _____

16. 您的职业是 (填空题)

17. 个人月收入（除稳定的工作收入，还包括投资、他人（如父母）赠与的收入等）
(单选题)

- 0-999 元 1 千-2999 元 3 千-4999 元 5 千-7999 元 8 千-9999 元
 1 万-29999 元 3 万-49999 元 5 万-99999 元 10 万元或以上

18. 您父母的月收入（除了稳定的工作收入，还包括投资、他人赠与的收入等）(单选题)

- 0-999 元 1 千-2999 元 3 千-4999 元 5 千-7999 元 8 千-9999 元
 1 万-29999 元 3 万-49999 元 5 万-99999 元 10 万元或以上

19. 您的教育程度是 (单选题)

- 小学 初中 高中 大专
 本科 研究生（硕士和博士） 其他（请填写） _____

20. 如果您愿意接受更深度的采访，欢迎留下联系方式（QQ、Skype 或者 Email）（自愿，可以不填）(填空题)

English Translation

Questionnaire: the Social Impact of Sina Weibo

Hello! I am a master candidate in the International Studies program at University of San Francisco. I am doing an academic research about social media and cyber democracy in China, which mainly focuses on use of Sina Weibo and its social impacts. This questionnaire will ask your Weibo using habits and your opinions about cyber democracy. The information collected from the survey will be counted as macro statistics in my master thesis. Thank you very much for your participation and sharing!

One: this section will ask the your habits of using Sina Weibo

1. Do you have a Sina Weibo account? (single choice)
 - yes (go to Question 2)
 - no (go to Question 8)

2. In the latest month, the frequency you go on Sina Weibo is (single choice)
 - more than 60 times (twice each day)
 - 30-60 times (1-2 times each day)
 - 15-29 times (once every 1-2 days)
 - 8-14 times (once every 2-4 days)
 - 1-7 times (once every 4-7 days)
 - haven't used Sina Weibo in the latest month

3. Each time you log onto Sina Weibo, how long do you usually stay? (single choice)
 - below 15 minutes
 - 10-29 minutes
 - 30-59 minutes
 - 1-2 hours
 - above 2 hours

4. Who do you follow the most on Weibo? (single choice)
 - people who I know off-line
 - entertainment and sports stars
 - intellectuals and scholars
 - the official Weibo of mainstream media in and outside the country
 - the official Weibo of enterprises (companies / corporates)
 - the official Weibo of government departments
 - Information sharing posts (jokes, quotations, beauty, fashion, food, health, travel, ext.)
 - other (please fill out) _____

5. What types of posts do you often comment and repost? (multiple choice)
 - activities of friends off-line
 - humorous jokes
 - domestic and international political and military situations
 - domestic social issues and events
 - activities of artists and stars
 - commercial information and advertisement
 - chicken soup and classic quotations

- historical and cultural knowledge
- scientific knowledge
- sports news
- beauty and fashion
- food, health, travel
- music and movie information
- other (please fill out) _____

6. Which of the following social issues and events do you often comment and repost? (multiple choice)

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> corruptions | <input type="checkbox"/> environmental pollutions | <input type="checkbox"/> food safety |
| <input type="checkbox"/> land issues | <input type="checkbox"/> judicial and legal justice | <input type="checkbox"/> gender discrimination |
| <input type="checkbox"/> income gap | <input type="checkbox"/> educational issues | <input type="checkbox"/> healthcare policies |
| <input type="checkbox"/> none of above | <input type="checkbox"/> other (please fill out) _____ | |

7. What is the most recent social issue or event that you followed, commented or reposted through Sina Weibo? What is your attitude and opinion toward this issue or event? (blank)

Two: this section will ask your opinions about Sina Weibo

8. In your opinion, how much influence do Weibo discussions have on the off-line social issues or social events? (single choice)

- very big influence fairly big influence fairly small influence little influence

9. Do you think it is free to express on Sina Weibo? (single choice)

- very free fairly free fairly unfree very unfree

10. In your opinion, what is the relation between use of Sina Weibo and democracy? (single choice)

- Sina Weibo use has increased democracy Sina Weibo use has reduced democracy
 Sina Weibo use has no influence on democracy other (please fill out) _____

11. According to the answer of the previous question, the reason why use of Sina Weibo has improved, reduced or has no influence on democracy is (blank)

12. The influence of Sina Weibo use on you is (multiple choice)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> it has made me hear multiple opinions | <input type="checkbox"/> it has changed my values |
| <input type="checkbox"/> it has changed my lifestyle | <input type="checkbox"/> it has increased a channel for my expression |
| <input type="checkbox"/> it has no influence on me | <input type="checkbox"/> other (please fill out) _____ |

Three: this section will collect your personal information, and these information will only be counted as macro statistics

13. Which province (or municipality) are you from? (blank)

14. Your age (blank)

15. Gender (single choice)

- male female other (please fill out) _____

16. Your career is (blank)

17. Personal monthly income (other than stable income from work, you should also include incomes from investments, and gifts from other people (eg. parents) (single choice)

- 0-999 Yuan 1,000-2,999 Yuan 3,000-4,999 Yuan
 5,000-7,999 Yuan 8,000-9,999 Yuan 10,000-29,999 Yuan
 30,000-49,999 Yuan 50,000-99,999 Yuan 10,000 0 Yuan or above

18. Your parents' monthly income (other than stable income from work, you should also include incomes from investments, and gifts from other people (single choice)

- 0-999 Yuan 1,000-2,999 Yuan 3,000-4,999 Yuan
 5,000-7,999 Yuan 8,000-9,999 Yuan 10,000-29,999 Yuan
 30,000-49,999 Yuan 50,000-99,999 Yuan 10,0000 Yuan or above

19. Your educational level is (single choice)

- primary school junior school high school junior college
 undergraduate graduate (master and PhD) other (please fill out) _____

20. If you are willing to receive more detailed interview, you can leave your contact information (QQ, Skype or email) (optional) (blanks)

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(Due to privacy concerns, code names are used in this thesis for individual Weibo accounts that are not "verified" users and have fewer followers, and their Weibo pages are not listed here.)

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