SINA WEIBO AND ITS POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS:
A CASE STUDY OF THE ZHOU YONGKANG INCIDENT

BY

WENQI YANG

THESIS

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Adviser:

Associate Professor Dan Shao

ABSTRACT

After the Chinese government blocked Facebook in 2008 and Twitter in 2009 in mainland China, perspicacious Chinese Internet service providers have invented alternative social media platforms. Sina Weibo is one of them.

Scholars studying the Internet and social media in Western countries have suggested that social media have the potential to construct a unique online public sphere and contribute to a much deeper social change. However, social media and its social and political implications in such a populous developing country with 710 million Internet users have not been thoroughly addressed due to the linguistic estrangement and the firm historical association of the new communication technology with democratic discourse. Furthermore, among the literature studying Chinese Internet, there is a lack of empirical research. The number of studies that look directly into the Chinese social media content is still relatively small. Therefore, this study is an effort to fill this gap through an empirical case study to map out the distinct dynamics in China's online public sphere facilitated by Sina Weibo.

This thesis strives to examine Weibo's role in facilitating public discussion and constructing an online public sphere in China. To this end, it analyses Sina Weibo users' discussion about the Zhou Yongkang incident. The theoretical framework applied in this study originates from Habermas's conception of the public sphere and Warner's notion of publics. Since these theories formed in Anglophone context, this study focuses on extrapolating the theories into Chinese context. This study uses mixed research methods. It uses both quantitative content analysis and qualitative critical discourse analysis. A wide range of political, social and historical perspectives are also employed to explore the diverse discourse and dynamic interaction on Weibo.

Drawing from the public discussion in Zhou's case, the thesis paints a relatively promising picture of the social media as a platform for personal expression in public discussion on political issues, comparatively jumping out of the discourse agenda set by the government and state media. The interaction among users indicates that rational-critical debate has become a part of China's online public sphere.

Keywords: Sina Weibo, public sphere, public discussion, corruption, Zhou Yongkang incident

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Chapter 1 Introduction

In early July 2009, over a thousand Uyghurs residing in the capital city of China's Xinjiang

Province, Urumqi, rioted to protest the reported deaths of two Uyghur factory workers in a brawl

in the faraway Guangdong Province (Xinhua Net, 2009, July 6). News of the factory fight was

quickly carried to Urumqi by the Bulletin Board System (BBS), blogs and SMS text messages,

precipitating the protests and heightening tensions between Han people and Uyghurs (Watts,

2009). According to the Chinese central government, the news of the factory fight was utilized

by the terrorist organization, Turkistan Islamic Party, who shared the information with their

members via Twitter and Facebook and initiated this violent riot. Just 10 years earlier, tight

censorship and a lack of reliable information would almost certainly have prevented news of the

initial fracas from ever reaching Xinjiang, not to mention communication among mainland

Uyghurs and the oversea terrorists, and it is likely that the deaths of nearly 200 people and

thousands of injuries (Xinhua News Agency, 2009) would have been prevented.

In another hot and humid July, July 2011, two high-speed trains on the Yongtaiwen

railway line collided on a viaduct in the suburbs of Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province. The two trains

derailed each other, and four cars fell off the viaduct, resulting in 40 deaths. Before any media

released the sad news, Chinese netizens had already gotten familiar with relevant information via

Microblogging sites. Photos were posted online by witnesses. When the government announced

to close the official rescue and buried a wrecked carriage at the site of the accident less than 72

hours after the accident, the tumultuous online discussion turned against the government, which

contributed to the unearthing of the buried car on July 25. Under the pressure of online public

opinion, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao visited the site on July 28 announcing that railway safety

was a top priority. Netizens' rage even urged the publishing of a critical editorial written by the

Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) flagship newspaper, the *People's Daily,* calling on China to say no to the "blood-smeared GDP" (*People's Daily*, 2011, July 28).

Around the Spring Festival in 2016, a post from Tianya BBS site was reposted on Sina Weibo and raised heated discussion. A middle-class young woman from Shanghai visited her fiancé's family which located in a remote village in Jiangxi Province. In that post, she posted several pictures of the dishes her future in-laws prepared for her visit and expressed her astonishment and disappointment of the family's poverty. She said that she immediately asked her fiancé to find someone with a car to take her to the nearest railway station and jumped on a train back to Shanghai without a second thought. The pictures and the story initiated netizens' vehement discussion about whether the woman's behavior was appropriate. However, the discussion soon turned to the criticism toward the governments' biased economic development policy which, according to the netizens, caused the extreme poverty in remote areas and the women's fleeing. Although several days later, the story was proved to be fake (Sina News, 2016), online discussion over the huge economic and cultural gap between urban and rural areas continued through the Spring Festival break.

These scenarios point the circumstances that prompted the writing of this thesis. This thesis is a part of the academic inquiry on the relationship between social media and the constructing of a cyber public sphere. It strives to address Sina Weibo's role in facilitating public discussion and forming a Chinese online public sphere. Specifically, this thesis conducts a case study about Sina Weibo's users' posts concerning the Zhou Yongkang incident.

1.1 Overview

On July 29, 2014, a news hit every citizen in China. The news said that Zhou Yongkang, the former Secretary of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission, had been placed

under an internal party investigation for "violations of party discipline" (Xinhua News Agency, 2014). Following the investigation, Zhou was expelled from the CCP. In an interview with state television carried by the website of the Xinhua News Agency, the president of China's Supreme People's Court, Zhou Qiang, remarked that the trial of Zhou Yongkang would be open. He also indicated that the open trail was an attempt to show the judicial transparency in China (Reuters, 2015). However, Zhou's trial unexpectedly took place secretly in Tianjin. On June 11, 2015, state media suddenly announced that Zhou had been convicted of bribery, abuse of power and the intentional disclosure of state secrets by the Tianjin First Intermediate People's Court (Xinhua News Agency, 2015). The verdict said that Zhou and his family members took 129 million RMB (over 20 million USD) in bribes. He received a life sentence in prison.

Zhou's case was unprecedented since no corruption investigation had ever been initiated against a member of the elite Politburo Standing Committee (PSC). The dismissal and trial of Zhou received a lot of attention from both traditional media and social media. The political nature of this incident and the heated discussion it caused make it an appropriate case for investigating the public discussion on Weibo and its political implications.

The study employs the public sphere theories as its theoretical framework. The Chinese government's regulation and censorship on the Internet makes Habermas's ideal public sphere model a less desirable concept in the discussion. Consequently, we extrapolate the notion of public sphere into Chinese context. In this thesis, public sphere is defined as a public discussion platform collecting ordinary citizens' voices and delivering these voices to other citizens and even the state. But this sphere is not meant to be completely free. Government's intervention persists. The scholarly inquiry about the Internet's role in building cyber public spheres has brought about a number of publications around the world. However, the discussion concerning

Chinese Internet is still under development. Besides, there is a lack of empirical research in this field of research. This study is an effort to fill this gap through an empirical case study to map out the distinct dynamics in China's online public sphere facilitated by Sina Weibo. This thesis strives to firstly examine whether netizens expressed diverse attitudes toward Zhou Yongkang incident. It also aimes to test whether the online public discussion concerning Zhou's case has the reflective feature through examining the relationship between a repost's opinion toward its source and the type of the source. Besides, the study attempts to interpret and explain the major frames of discourse existing in the posts that conveyed unfavorable opinion toward the incident.

The thesis uses both content analysis and critical discourse analysis as its research methods. These two methods complement each other during the analysis and provide both quantitative and qualitative data. We argue that three important attributes of online public sphere concerning Zhou's case have appeared on Sina Weibo: diversity, reflectivity and critical-rationality. Although government's tight censorship has kept regulating the online public opinions, the online discussion on Sina Weibo concerning Zhou Yongkang incident indicates that a variety of voices have existed on China's social media. This thesis portrays a relatively promising picture of Chinese social media as a platform for personal expression in public discussion on political issues. Cyber public spheres have been under development in China.

A detailed introduction of the Internet in China and Sina Weibo is presented in the following sections. At the end of this chapter, research questions and hypotheses are introduced.

1.2 The Internet in China

On September 20, 1987, a professor in Beijing named Yunfeng Wang sent an email with the subject "Go beyond the Great Wall to the World" to Karlsruhe University in Germany (Hu, 2009). The email was mainland China's the first attempt to use the Internet. Since then, the

Chinese government, the Chinese scientific and technological community, and the international academic community have collaborated to connect this ancient country with an over 5000-year history to the Internet. In as early as 1989, the Internet had played a role in political issues. During the student protest in Spring 1989, college students in Beijing used the Internet service provided by their universities to communicate with their oversea counterparts and disseminate the information to other cities when the government tried to block the information about the protest (Calhoun, 1989). On April 20, 1994, China officially joined the Internet when it opened a 64K International dedicated circuit through the Sprint Corporation of the United States (J. Yang, 2016).

Through two decades of rapid development, the Internet has become almost ubiquitous in China, especially in urban areas. In the year of 2008, China surpassed the United States to become the largest population of Internet users in the world (Barboza, 2008). According to the report from the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) (2016), a semi-government organization, by June 2016, the number of Chinese Internet users reached up to 710 million, accounting for 51.7% of the total 1.35 billion Chinese population (see figure 1). At the same time, the number of mobile Internet users reached 656 million, accounting for 92.5% of the total Internet users. As of mid-2016, Chinese Internet users spent an average of 26.3 hours online per week. Most users went online to obtain information, communicate and exchange ideas, purchase goods or services, seek entertainment and recreation.

Figure 1. Population of Internet users and the Internet penetration rate (2012-2016)
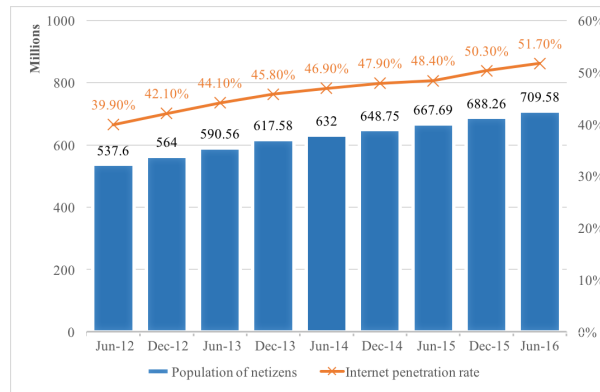
1.3 Sina Weibo

Shortly after Twitter was created in 2006, its copycat Fanfou was introduced to China in May 2007. At the dawn of June 4, 2009—the 20th anniversary of Tiananmen protest—Twitter was blocked in mainland China (Sutter, 2009). After the eruption of the ethnic riot in Xinjiang, the incident I mentioned briefly at the beginning of this chapter, Fanfou was swiftly shut down. However, only one month later, Sina received its green light from the authorities to offer a censored microblogging service, Sina Weibo, in August 2009. Later on, Tencent, Netease and other Internet service providers opened their own microblogging sites. After changing its domain name to weibo.com, Sina Weibo has come to be known simply as Weibo because of its popularity. In the rest of the thesis, Weibo will be used as a shortened term for Sina Weibo, as well. By the end of September 2015, Weibo has 222 million monthly active users, and in the month of September 2015, the number of Weibo's daily active users reached to 100 million. 97% of Sina Weibo's traffic came from mainland China (Sina & Weibo data center, 2015).

As microblogging service, Weibo is not a mere replica of Twitter by strategically combining the features of Twitter and Facebook, making it not only an information-based but also a friend-based social networking service. Since people mostly use social media to maintain

their offline social ties and one's behaviour of actively following others on social media can extend his or her online connections, the friend-based feature of Weibo contributes to the more active interplay between the users' online and offline activities (Chen & Fu, 2016). Compared to Twitter, Weibo has several distinct features contributing to its popularity in China. Both Weibo and Twitter limit the post length to 140 characters. However, 140 Chinese characters can tell much more information than 140 English characters (Ding, 2011; Sullivan, 2013). The renowned and dissident Chinese artist Ai Weiwei once said in an interview, "In the Chinese language, 140 characters is a novella" (Rosen, 2011). Another news report vividly illustrated the different language power between Chinese and English within a certain length limit through using these two languages to report a same piece of news, as shown in table 1 (Millward, 2013).

Table 1. A comparison of Chinese and English posts

	Chinese	English
News content	【苹果第二财季净利 95 亿美元同比下降 18%】苹果今天公布了截至 3 月 21 日 2013 财年第二财季财报。报告显示，该季度苹果实现营收 436 亿美元，同比增长 11%；实现净利润 95 亿美元，同比下降 18%，十年内首次出现季度利润同比收缩。合摊薄后每股收益 10.09 美元，同比增长 23.0%。	[Apple's second-quarter net profit fell 18% to $9.5 billion] Apple today unveiled a report for the second quarter earnings of the fiscal year ending March 21, 2013. According to the report, the company obtained quarterly revenue of $43.6 billion, up to 11% year on year. The company gained a net profit of $9.5 billion, down 18% year on year. This was the first quarterly profit shrinking within a decade. Diluted earnings per share were $10.09, up 23% year on year.
Character count	139	466

The second distinct feature of Weibo is its long micro-blog service. Long micro-blog (长微博) is basically a combination of microblog and blog. It is a post with pictures of text rendered

in a bitmap supported by third-party applications. This feature breaks the length limitation of 140 characters. Figure 2 shows an example of long micro-blog. The micro-blog contains a Chinese sentence within regular length limitation and one attached image displaying a substantial number of Chinese characters. The relation between the sentence and the picture is similar to the abstract and main text in an academic article. Readers can click on the picture to expand it and read the whole article and click on "show less" to minimize the picture. This feature can effectively circumvent program-based censorship, because Weibo's sensitive word filtering mechanism cannot examine images (Li, 2013).

Figure 2. Long micro-blog

The third discrete characteristic of Weibo is that it provides many content enrichment options, such as emoticon, photo, and video, whereas Twitter only allows users to add images to its text-based tweets. Users can determine the audience of a post by selecting from a drop-down menu that includes "public," "friend circle," and "only me." The "public" option means that all Weibo users can view the post, and the "friend circle" limits the audience to users who both follow and are followed by the author (see figure 3).

Figure 3. Weibo's new post interface.

Additionally, Weibo integrates a variety of online services, including streaming, video

sharing, and shopping, which are out of Twitter's service domain. Same as long micro-blog

service, streaming and video sharing are usually used by users to avoid censorship. In 2015, 86

new movies pre-sold their tickets via Weibo. From January to November 2015, Weibo users

spent 2930.7 million RMB (over 422 million USD) to read pay-per-view content (Sina & Weibo

data center, 2015). Researchers have argued that it is the single platform's myriad of services

that attract Chinese netizens and contribute to its user base's rapid growth (Yang, 2012).

When the majority of traditional media such as newspapers and television are still under

the tight control of the Chinese government, social media like Weibo provide netizens with an

alternative platform to express opinions and participate in critical debates. Weibo embraces

distinctive features of convenience, digitality, interactivity, usability, low cost, instantaneity and

sociality, breaking the information asymmetry (Jiang, 2016; Shao, Lu & Wu, 2012). However, to

avoid overestimating Weibo's power as a channel of communication, we need to crosscheck the

data provided before. According to a study by Fu and Chau (2013) from the University of Hong

Kong, a significant portion of Weibo accounts was inactive in term of microblog contribution,

with 57.4% of their statuses remaining empty. Among the non-empty statuses Weibo accounts,

more than half posted less than five pieces of microblog. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that many Weibo users seem to just surf the microblog but do not often express opinions. They also found that a large number of original posts and reposts are created by a small group of users (p.5). These findings raise questions regarding the reach of Weibo and how participatory the platform is. Nevertheless, reading posts by itself affects the way those "surfers" think about and understand society (Svensson, 2014). Based on both academic studies and industrial reports, Weibo has become a consequential component of the Internet in China, and the popularity of Weibo reveals that Chinese netizens have enthusiastically embraced the new form of communication platform, however, the public opinions on Weibo cannot represent the overall Chinese citizens' opinions.

1.4 Research Questions

This thesis seeks to address the following two research questions (RQs):

RQs: What is Sina Weibo's role in facilitating the public discussion about the Zhou Yongkang incident? And what attributes of China's online public sphere have been demonstrated?

To make these two research questions more operationalizable, the following concrete sub-questions will be investigated:

RQ1a: How did Weibo users respond to the Zhou Yongkang incident?

RQ1b: Did Weibo users' responds toward the incident change over the two time periods (see the explanation of the two time periods in Chapter 3)?

RQ2a: Whether, and to what extent, did Weibo users offer opinions toward the government and other officials? And what were their opinions?

RQ2b: Were Weibo users' attitudes toward Zhou's case correlated to those toward the government and other officials?

RQ3a: To what extent did Weibo users write original posts? And to what extent did Weibo users repost from other sources?

RQ3b: Whether, and to what extent, were the reposts' attitudes toward the source correlated to the type of the source (governmental actor or non-government actor)?

RQ4: Among the posts that expressed unfavorable attitudes toward Zhou's case, what are the frames of their criticism?

Based on the seven sub-questions, we raised three hypotheses:

H1: Weibo users' expressed different attitudes toward Zhou's case in the two time periods?

H2: When a post expressed an unfavorable attitude toward Zhou's case, it was more likely to express an unfavorable attitude toward the government and other officials.

H3: Weibo users tended to express different opinions toward the sources in the reposts based on the whether the sources came from governmental actors or non-government actors.

1.5 Thesis Outline

In this chapter, "Introduction," I have introduced the development status of the Internet in China, Sina Weibo's distinct characteristics and the Zhou Yongkang incident. I have proposed my thesis research as a contribution to the field of social media and public sphere in China through presenting a case study of netizens' public discussion about Zhou's case on Sina Weibo.

Chapter 2, "Public sphere and social media in China," reviews both the theoretical framework of this study and previous studies in this field. Since the theoretical concentration, public sphere, originated in Europe, it starts with reviewing a thorough discussion of Habermas's

ideal public sphere model. Then the chapter discusses the plausibility of employing this term in China's case. Afterward, it reviews major literature concerning the Internet and social media's potential role in facilitating public discussion in China.

Chapter 3, "Mixed method," first introduces the sampling logic of this project. Then it discusses the major two research methods used in this thesis, content analysis and discourse analysis, as well as data analysis procedure. It also strives to discuss the compatibility of those two methods and justify the validity and necessity of using mixed methods.

Chapter 4, "Content and discourse," describes Weibo users' overall attitudes toward Zhou's case and the government and other officials. It also tests the correlation between the attitudes toward Zhou's case and the government and other officials, as well as that between a repost's attitude toward the source and the type of the source. Furthermore, the discourse frames of the posts that expressed unfavorable attitude toward this incident are scrutinized and categorized.

Chapter 5, "Conclusion and discussion," summarizes the major findings of this thesis project and their implication in future studies. It later concludes the thesis by discussing the significance and limitations of this study.

Chapter 2 Public Sphere and Social media in China

This chapter introduces the theoretical framework of this study, the public sphere theories. It reviews both Habermas's classical bourgeois public sphere model and the criticism toward this ideal model. In this process, the researcher concentrated on examining whether this Anglophone concept could be applied to China's case. This chapter also scrutinizes the academic inquiry of the relationship between social media and public sphere in China. At the end of this chapter, the research gives the definition of public sphere used in the study.

2.1 Public sphere

2.1.1 Public sphere in the Anglophone context

"Public sphere" is a highly controversial concept. In his groundbreaking work (1989a), *The structural transformation of the public sphere*, Habermas contrasted the bourgeois public sphere of the liberal democratic states of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe— Great Britain, France, and Germany— with the fragmented sphere of late capitalism. At first, Habermas defined public sphere as a domain between the state-centered political sphere and economy-centered private sphere:

> "The bourgeois public sphere maybe conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor." (Habermas, 1989, p.27)

> The public sphere is open to all citizens who may "assemble and unite freely, express and publicize their opinions freely" (Habermas, 1989b, p.231). As a critical concept, the bourgeois public sphere signifies an open forum of debate and an egalitarian community of citizens implicit

in the practice of the bourgeoisie and explicit in their justifications of the public sphere (Asen & Brouwer, 2001) This public sphere is based on rational-critical discourse with three distinct characteristics: access is guaranteed to all citizens; citizens debate openly; and citizens' debates circle around issues of general interest. Feeling disappointed by the development of modern welfare states after World War II, Habermas ascertained that the increasingly powerful state authority and the development of mass communication technologies contributed to the emergence of the mediated public sphere. He stated that the form of participation in the public sphere had changed: citizens' tendency toward active discussion was eclipsed by their passive consumption of public communication.

Habermas's idealized construction of the bourgeois public sphere and his criticism of the mediated public sphere raised heated discussion in the academia. Scholars like Calhoun (1992), Fraser (1992), and Negt and Kluge (1993) asserted a disjunction between Habermas's normative model of the public sphere and the empirical public sphere that can be practically formed in real life. Researchers argued that Habermas was apparently blind to "the many variety of exclusion" (Lunt & Livingstone, 2013, p.90), and his theory was based upon a form of direct democracy that could not accommodate the complexity and scale of modern society. They also pointed out that some groups of citizens were excluded from Habermas's conception, like women, ethnic minority and laborers. Nancy Fraser (1992) argued in *Rethinking in the public sphere*, that the bourgeois public sphere, as a matter of fact, was composed by "a number of significant exclusion" (p.110). Just as Athenian democracy positioned women, slaves and foreigners outside of the public discussion, the "common concerns" that Habermas's liberal bourgeois public sphere is destined to deal with needs to be justified. Noticing the limitations of Habermas's bourgeois public sphere frame, why do scholars still keep using this concept? That is because "as

a normative category, against which we can measure the democratic claims of existing media systems, it retains a powerful appeal" (Sparks, 2005).

Since the term of "public sphere" originated from democratic European nations, can we use it to discuss public discussion in non-democratic socialist state? Apparently, Osaka Negt and Alexander Kluge's answer is yes (1993). They assessed Habermas's bourgeois public sphere concept through a neo-Marxist perspective. For them, the public sphere "is the site where struggles are decided by other means than war" (p. ix). They provided an alternative understanding of the public sphere as a form of organization of collective social experience, as opposed to rational discourse. In contrast to Habermas's model of the bourgeois public sphere, they articulated the notion of a proletarian public sphere. In his later revision of his account of the public sphere, Habermas (1996) also admitted that there was more than one type of public sphere. Consequently, according to Negt and Kluge's argument and Habermas's revision, the discussion of the public sphere in a non-capitalist state also warrants significance. Given the wide range of the term and the use of "public sphere" outside of the Western context, we may conceive of the public sphere as a broad category and treat Habermas's model as one specific manifestation.

Before moving into the discussion of whether and how can public sphere theory be applied to China' case, there is one more critical theoretical term that needs further articulation, the "public". When we talk about public sphere, what is the public we are talking about?

Michael Warner (2002) articulated the concept of "public" or "publics" in his book, *Publics and counterpublics*. He described a public as:

> A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Web

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sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists by virtue of *being addressed* [original emphasis] (Warner, 2002, p.50).

By using the plural form of public, Warner admitted that there exists more than just one public. Members of a public are strangers, and they are connected by their discussions on a particular theme, like a book, a show or a website. The reflexive feature of public in Warner's context indicates that publics exist as both addressees and addressors. The roles of addressee and addressor are interchangeable. When at one circumstance, one exists as an addressee; at another circumstance, this addressee can serve as an addressor. However, the public is not a stable entity always located in the aggregated physical bodies of persons (Dowey, 1927). Rather, the public is an ephemeral phenomenon built through collective perception. Therefore, common interest is the prerequisite of the forming of a public. When a netizen reposts another netizen's post on social media, the specific content of the original post attracts the interest of the two netizens forming a small public, and the first netizen changes his or her role from an addressee to an addressor.

2.1.2 Public sphere in Chinese discourse

The introduction of the notion of the public sphere to China was no later than its translation to the English language. Around the pro-democracy demonstration at Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989, scholars of Chinese studies began to debate the prospect of the public sphere in the socialist China (Calhoun, 1989). And the concept of the public sphere is no less controversial than that in the Anglophone discourse.

The debate reached its first peak in the mid-1990s, with the opening of a symposium on the public sphere and civil society in 1993. Instead of rushing to the existence of public sphere in socialist China, scholars first concentrated on the plausibility of using this concept to analyze Chinese issues. At the beginning of her discussion, Rankin (1993) asked a question: to what

extent can either "civil society" or "public sphere" be applied to Chinese history (p.158)? In retrospect of Chinse society in the late imperial era and early Republic era, she asserts that a premature public sphere had existed in China in the late Ming dynasty (late sixteenth to early seventeenth century) and continuously developed until the existence of an elite-centered local public sphere in mid-Qing dynasty (eighteenth century). That public sphere also involved both state and social power, but in a different way from the West. During these two periods, the central government's power was decentralized, it gradually lost its control in local areas. This change in political power combined with the long-lasting Confucian tradition of elite-centered social hierarchy contributed to the existence of an elite-centered public sphere. This public sphere was different from that arousing in early modern Europe because of the different state-societal relations between China and Europe. Additionally, divorced from Habermas's bourgeois public sphere, the elite-dominated Chinese public sphere was only at a local level until mid-19th century when rebellions and uprisings frequently arose (Esherick &Rankin, 1990). David Strand (1991) argued that under warlord ruling, the information gathering of urban citizens in teahouses, markets, and restaurants were quite pervasive. Similar with that in Habermas's narration, those physical public spaces facilitated rickshaw pullers' discussion about their common interest. This kind of information exchange raised the public awareness of political issues and as a result, led to citizens' appeal to the government over their common concerns. The low social status of rickshaw pullers indicated that the elite-centered public sphere in late imperial China had transformed to a street-level one.

In the first three decades of the PRC, China was under Mao Zedong's dictatorship. The state power gradually permeated into the economy. Therefore, the dichotomy between the political sphere and the private sphere in Habermas's conception blurred. A public sphere in

Maoist China was unlikely to be justifiable because of the absence of a well-developed civil society (Chamberlain, 1993). The party-state's monopoly of the public sphere in Maoist China was based on what Robert Lifton (1989) defined as the "ideological totals" of the "sacred science" that is inherent to the Communist ideology (p.419). At the same time, the overall importance of ideas and the media in creating and maintaining the monopolistic public sphere accorded intellectuals, people who are most likely to be a part of public discussion, a privileged but vulnerable position, which has been aptly described as a "velvet prison" (Liu & McCormick, 2011). Considering the introduction of the market economic system to China after 1978, scholars identified a burgeoning civil society in the post-reform China and the forming of a realm of public political discussion (Madsen, 1993; Soliger, 1992; M. Yang, 1989). Focusing on a developing democratic public sphere in the post-reform China, Madsen (1993) noticed that various autonomous, or at least partially autonomous communities, such as trade associations, professional associations, labor unions, were revived or arose. The existence of those communities weakened the state control over public opinion and seemed to lead toward a modern public sphere, based on different endogenous resources to the Anglophone-style liberalism.

Consequently, despite different origins of state formation and discrete historical and cultural context in different regions of the world, the Anglophone tradition of public sphere can still be a useful notion in the analysis of state-society relations as long as there exists a social force independent form state, be it local elites, rickshaw pullers or pro-democracy students. With the marketization of traditional mass media and the boom of the Internet in China, there has been a revival of interest in public sphere theories among scholars of Chinese studies. Scholars turned

their attention to the potential of the Internet and social media to facilitate public discussion among citizens, which are further explored in the following section.

2.2 Debate on social media and public sphere in China

The debate on the relation between the Internet and public started in democratic nations like the United States. Comparing the cyberspace and Habermas's classical public sphere, scholars demonstrated the Internet's potential for building a new public sphere. If blogs may be the equivalent of the diaries and journals that played a critical role in the development of bourgeois public sphere, the perhaps the online bulletin boards are the cyber equivalent of the eighteenth-century salons, teahouses, and cafés which witnessed the rational-critical debates on political issues (Barton, 2005). The Internet is everywhere around the world, and social media are far from Chinese specialties. However, the Internet in China has taken on such distinctly Chinese characteristics that it may now be called the Chinese Internet in the same way as we call Chinese literature "Chinese literature" and Chinese medicine "Chinese medicine" (G. Yang, 2014). These particular characteristics include the content and linguistic features on Chinese websites as well as the ways in which the Internet and social media are used by citizens and enterprises and administrated by the government. The Chinese Internet is the reflection of the many contradictions and complexities of the society in which it is embedded: rapid economic growth accompanied by glaring social inequalities, environmental crisis conflicted with industrial development, and relative economic freedom parallel to strict political control (Wang, 2014). Accordingly, when we discuss Chinese social media's potential in forming a cyber public sphere, we should always account the China's specified social and political contexts. Gan and Wang (2015) collected 3178 CSSCI papers on Chinese social media from China Academic Journals Full-text Database during the period of 2006- 2013. According to their study, social media and

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public sphere was not among the top ten mostly analysed topics in Chinese-language academia. Consequently, the section concentrates on English-language papers and books.

2.2.1 Liberalist discourse

When the Chinese government initiated different policies to stimulate the Internet development in the late 1990s, journalists, scholars and government officials in the United States held a liberalist attitude toward the Internet's role in China. Technology determinism treats the Internet as an effective medicine that can "cure" the authoritarian political system in China. People with similar points of view think that netizens, in pursuit of "objective" information, are expected to be highly IT-savvy and able to employ the newest technologies to circumvent Chinese government's censorship measures (Damm, 2007).

Contrast to traditional media, which are basically based on a "one-to-many" structure of information flow, the Internet allows various models of communication: one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many and many-to-one. The technology of Internet makes the government-controlled asymmetric information flow less influential. Perrit (2008) passionately stated that it is impossible for totalitarian sovereigns to "ensure a safe environment by controlling the newspapers, radio, and television stations because the World Wide Web remains beyond their control and manipulation" (p.431). Former U.S. President Bill Clinton pointed out after his visit to Beijing that, "attempting to control the Internet in China was like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall" (Zhao, 2008). The U.S. Embassy in Beijing optimistically predicted that "as the number of Internet users grows, … the medium will become an increasingly important tool in fostering the development of civil society in China" (U.S. Embassy in Beijing, 2001). An American scholar, Roya Akhavan-Majid (2004), asserted that the Internet had the potential to provide a new means for the rising of full commercial and independent information providers in China (p.560). Even

after his own experimental blog account was taken down by the Chinese government, Nicholas Kristof, a columnist for the *New York Times*, hailed Chinese citizens' freedom in the blogosphere. He believed that the CCP's monopoly on information control was collapsing and asserted that following this collapse the party's complete monopoly on political power would come to an end (2006).

In retrospect of how the Chinese government solved previous social crises, some scholars put the liberalist discourse under question. They argued that politicians should not assume that what happened in the Western world will be duplicated in China. The Internet itself can hardly change the political landscape because "a new technology of communication medium is more likely to reflect and supplement the existing political order than alter it" (Nugent, 2001, p.224). The power relationships embedded in the prevailing communication networks among media, politics, and businesses are "programmed" to favor the status quo rather than social change. How the Chinese Internet paradox evolves will depend on the negotiation between the state and an emerging civil society (Castell, 2009; Chen, 2014). With more Chinese language speakers joining in the discussion, scholars started to conduct more empirical studies based on the "real" Internet environment in China. Huang (1999) predicted that the as a result of strict censorship and low Internet penetration rate, the Internet would only play a qualified role in democratic development in China. Scholars pointed out that the Internet is just a platform. It is normatively neutral and socially malleable, depending on the prevailing social patterns (Leibold, 2011). Comparing the Internet with the nuclear weapon, Yuan (2010) stated that its effect depends on who controls it and how it is used. Also, Mackinnon (2008) warned that when we talk about the social media's impact, we should be aware of not confusing a medium with a cause of change.

The early enthusiasm of the Internet's power in China gradually faded away when the

Chinese government gained tighter control on the Internet, closed down of several Bulletin

Board System (BBS) sites and blogging sites, and arrested several online dissidents since 2003.

Just like solving the political crisis brought by the pro-democracy protest in 1989 and the

economic crisis in the late 1990s, the Chinese government once again proved that it is good at

keeping the society under its tight control. With the disappearance of the liberalist discourse,

attention has been turned to the other party of the state-society relation, the government.

Researchers investigated both how the Chinese government utilizes the Internet in its governance

and how it monitors the Internet.

2.2.2 Governance via the Internet

The Chinese government has developed a variety of methods to adopt social media to strengthen

its ruling: official microblogging, online consultation and so on.

By the end of 2014, different levels of government had created over 130 thousand official

accounts on Weibo (People's Daily and Sina Weibo, 2015). There exists a non-negotiable need

for adapting the microblogs within the local governments to engage the public. Through

publishing relevant information on Weibo, local governments build a freeway accelerating the

speed of government-citizen interaction. Different organizational actors involved in the official

microblogs can be divided into different types according to their interests (Schlaeger & M. Jiang,

2014). The local propaganda department tends to use microblogs for information dissemination

because of its role as the mouthpiece of a municipality. Informing the public is also significant

for the local police department, which uses microblogs to manage public crises. Slightly different

from the propaganda sector, police department pays more attention to gauge public opinion

before local incidents escalate into national news headlines (Svensson, 2014). Political decision-

makers in the municipal government standing committee are interested in improving service provision, reducing corruption among street-level bureaucrats, and providing government employees with direct citizen contact. Therefore, their microblogs pay more attention to netizens' comments instead of disseminating information (Schlaeger & Jiang, 2014). Through using official microblogs provided by private Internet service providers, governments obtain a new communication channel to interact with a large user population without expending resources on hardware and software. At the same time, the blue "V" sign guarantees the authentic identity of those government microblogs. Although it is still too early for us to predict that the official microblogs will in the short run lead to local governance overhaul, they could in the long run lead to organizational change (Tong & Zuo, 2014).

Online consultation or online deliberation is another method for the government to reinforce its ruling via the Internet. Before the era of the Internet, deliberation has been conducted through local consultative meetings. Now there have been various online spaces for the deliberation: government websites and state-owned commercial online portals as well as certain discussion rooms (Noesselt, 2014). Citizens can ask questions or express advice via the online forums on local government's official websites. Among 2869 Chinese counties, online forums were identified for 2227. Although there is no guarantee of a timely response, researchers found that approximately one-third of county governments respond to citizen demands expressed online (Chen, Pan & Xu, 2015).

A more direct but less studied form of online deliberation is the online consultation regarding the drafting of laws and regulations (Bella, 2014; Noesselt, 2014). The Legislative Affairs Office of the State Council maintains a comment room in order to collect opinions and reactions to the draft version of laws and regulations. Since 2006, the National People's

Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference have maintained a blog related to the annual sessions of these two legislative bodies. The initiation of online consultation is seen as the government's reaction toward the public discontent (Givens & MacDonald, 2013). Through establishing institutions for deliberation and consultation, the government provides the citizens with an opportunity to vent their frustration in the purpose of reducing the pressure exerted on the central party-state. Although the online deliberation and consultation allow straight conversation between citizens and government, since such communication still follows a top-down model, it is less plausible to take them as the prolog of democracy in China (Noesselt, 2014). Moreover, the opinions expressed online are not representative due to the low Internet penetration rate and the citizens' lack of awareness of e-government. Therefore, in the foreseeable future, "online consultation is likely to remain an instrument for communication between government decision-makers and a limited set of socially advantaged, politically sophisticated netizens" (Balla, 2014, p.228).

2.2.3 Censorship and regulation

In many ways, the framing of current research and the narratives surrounding social media reflect a continuing tendency among scholars to emphasize the Chinese state's authoritarian resilience of the technologies. There has been a strong interest among scholars and institutions in the West to document and analyze the Chinese government's backstage censorship practices on social media and the government's public regulation.

Mackinnon, a famous Chinese Internet expert and former journalist described a range of government strategies for monitoring the Internet:

"Cyber-attacks against activists, dissidents, and Chinese exiles could compromise their computer networks and email accounts. Device and network controls involve

preinstalling information filtering and tracking mechanisms in computers and routers sold in China. Domain-name controls prevented ordinary individuals from registering Internet domain names ending in ".cn." Localized disconnection and restriction referred to shutting down connections in specific locations entirely to ensure that locals cannot use the Internet or mobile phones to organize protests. Surveillance works through identity registration for Internet usage, monitoring software, and the compliance of Internet companies. The government proactively steers online conversations through party members, government officials, and "fifty-cent party," people paid to write posts in favor of their employers. (Mackinnon, 2011, 39-42)"

The "Great Firewall" of China prevents Internet users from accessing some foreign social media, like Facebook (blocked since 2008), Youtube (blocked since 2009) and Twitter (blocked since 2009). Besides the direct blocking, the govern has initiated efficient and strict censoring control over the social media provided by mainland Internet service providers. It is reported that approximately 4.5% of the sensitive content were deleted by the system without hitting the audience, 30% could be deleted within 30 minutes after being posted, and 90% of them could be removed within 24 hours (Chiu, Ip & Silverman, 2013; Zhu et al., 2013). As a result, when people want to read some particular Weibo posts, it shows "Permission denied," indicating that the post has been set by the censor to be inaccessible by other users, but the original writer may still see it posted on his or her own page. Some posts are marked "Weibo does not exist" because they are completely removed by the censor. Under other circumstance, posts are deprived of the commenting function without the knowledge of the writer (Fu, Chan & Chau, 2013). The censoring is not only efficient but also broad. It covers not only political issues but also issues such as crimes and economics (Hassid, 2015).

Scholars pointed out that the Chinese government does not conduct the censoring work all by itself, and the censorship is getting more and more decentralized (Brady, 2009; Li, 2010; Mackinnon, 2008; Tang and P. Yang, 2011). Private Internet service companies, like Sina,

Netease, and Tencent, often adopt the principle of "self-discipline" as a means to avoid penalties and suspension of services and to ensure market exposure (Li, 2010; Vuori & Paltemag, 2015). According to Deibert and Rohozinki's study (2010), Chinese government's censoring practices belong to the "second generation." This generation's tactics include the construction of a legal environment legitimizing information control, authorities' informal requests to companies for removing unappropriated information, technical shutdowns of websites and computer-networked attacks.

Besides efficiency, broadness and decentralization, inconsistency is another significant feature of China's Internet censorship. Studies show that Internet censoring has come and gone, and the censored content also varies from time to time (King, Pan & Roberts, 2013; Liang & Hu, 2010; Tang & P. Yang, 2011). Without blocking all the politically sensitive content, the government allows the full range of expression of negative and positive comments about the party-state, its policies, and its leaders. Firstly, the whipping up of nationalist favor, to a certain extent, is permitted or even encouraged by the government. The socialist Chinese state has been using nationalist ideology to bolster its legitimacy ever since the Sino-Japanese War era (1937-1945). Secondly, the online exposure of local government's malfeasance and lower-ranked officials' corruption is also permitted, because it assists the central government to monitor its local agents. It seems that the central government tries to separate itself from local governments, and by punishing local governments and correcting their wrongdoing, the central government is able to reinforce its legitimacy as well as to reduce the social grievance among people (Givens & MacDonald, 2013; Tong & Zuo, 2014). Consequently, the Chinese government fully understand the necessity of leaving channels open so that the frustrated citizens may blow off steam and feel that their opinions matter (Hassid, 2012; Shirky, 2014). No matter how inconsistent the

censoring system is, there are certain bottom lines that cannot be touched. The most significant two are: challenging CCP's ruling legitimacy and mobilizing offline collective action (G. Yang, 2014; Hassid, 2012; King, Pan & Roberts, 2013).

Understanding the existence and characteristics of censorship, scholars turn to the netizens' reaction toward government's censoring practices. Are they aware of censorship's existence? Have those practices modified their online behaviors? Has the censorship successfully get rid of those dissident voices? Based on survey study, scholars have found that Internet users do have an awareness of Internet censorship. And those with longer Internet usage experience are more aware of it than newer users. Moreover, netizens are more likely to accept censorship as a normal consequence of Internet uses as time passes (Wang & Mark, 2015).

Roberts (2015) found that previous experience with censorship does not induce self-censorship among netizens. On the contrary, they are more likely to repost on similar topics which have been censored, to post on even more sensitive topics and are more likely to be censored after censorship. She stated that netizens take their continuing writing as a form of protest, expressing their anger of being censored. At the same time, being censored implies what the government thinks is important. Therefore, censorship turns out to be a badge of honor for a netizen who is trying to gain more followers. Instead of passively admitting the existence of Internet, netizens have developed a variety of creative methods to fight back (King, Ip & Pan, 2013; Mackinnon, 2008; Shklovski &Kotamraju, 2011). Abbreviations, neologisms, homophones, and homographs have been used to avoid keyword based automated censorship. Fan Yang (2014) mentioned that using homonyms to replace the sensitive words or phrases has become a common practice for Chinese netizens to poke fun at the government's censorship. For instance, netizens use "river crab" (hé xiè, 河蟹) as a homonym of "harmony" (hé xié, 和谐), as

in the state slogan of building a "harmonious society" during Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao's administration (2003-2013). Multimedia remix, as we have mentioned in Chapter 1, is also a method for netizens to slip through censors because visual, audio and gaming content is not as easily searched and filtered as text-based messages (G. Yang & Jiang, 2015).

Faced with the doubts toward Chinese government's Internet censorship, scholars state that censorship is not a local specialty of China; a few Western countries have also justifiably developed Internet censorship practices (Leibold, 2011; Wang & Mark, 2015). For example, France censors Nazi-related content and blocks access to those websites (Pan, 2016). Although the United States has not yet censored the Internet, it has adopted ubiquitous Internet surveillance to monitor its citizens through the National Security Agency, as revealed in the Snowden Affair (Greenward et al., 2013).

Besides the backstage censorship, the Chinese government has set forth a set of regulations to administrate the online public sphere, among which the real name registration policy is the most influential one. The real name registration regulation was initiated first as a set of municipal provisions targeting Sina Weibo. Later it became codified as a law passed by the National People's Congress (People's Net, 2012), and rolled out to all major Chinese Internet service providers and web portals. Although this policy has not been strictly performed by those private companies, it demonstrates that the government strives to limit microblogging as a public sphere (M. Jiang, 2016)

Summarily, the Chinese government has developed an efficient, extensive, decentralized and inconsistent censoring system protecting its legitimacy from being attacked and preventing collection actions from happening. However, both the system itself and netizens' reaction indicate that the Internet users still enjoy a certain degree of freedom and that some politically

sensitive topics are allowed by the government. Therefore, the existence of the systematic

censoring practices will not largely undermine the development of the online public discussion

and a cyber public sphere in China (G. Yang, 2009; G. Yang & M. Jiang, 2015).

2.2.4 Online activism

Another group of scholars held a more optimistic attitude toward the Internet and social media's

power in facilitating public discussion and building a public sphere in China (Esarey & Qiang,

2008; Jiang & Beaudoin, 2016; Leggett, 2014; Tang & Sampson, 2012; F. Yang, 2014; G. Yang

, 2009, 2010; G. Yang & Calhoun, 2007; G. Yang & Jiang, 2015; Zhang, 2016; Zhao, 2008;

Zhou, 2009 etc.). They focused on the online activism and how online public opinions have

changed the offline world. Moreover, they pay more attention to the content of the online public

discussion and some of them employ content analysis as their research method.

Among these scholars, few have studied the Chinese Internet as closely as Goubin Yang,

a U.S.-based Chinese scholar. In Guobin Yang landmark book, *The power of the Internet in*

China, G. Yang (2009) stated that the Internet has brought about a "restive society alive with

conflict and contention" (p.209) and he believed this society is moving in a positive direction.

Without exaggerating the reforming power of the Internet, Yang argued that even without formal

institutional transformation, the Internet can expand citizens' unofficial democracy through

undermining state control and generating greater political transparency (p.213). In an earlier

article, Yang raised a term of "green public sphere" (G. Yang & Calhoun, 2007). "Green public

sphere" is a public sphere of environmental discourse (p.212). The authors demonstrated that the

construction of a Chinese green public sphere depends crucially on citizens and citizen

organizations and their creative use of the Internet (p.230). In their case study of the PM 2.5

campaign, Fedorenko and Sun (2015) also kept their minds on the Weibo-based public

discussion on environmental issues. They pointed out that the Internet is most useful to enhance the interaction between different activists and between environmentalists and individuals by disseminating information. Besides, G. Yang (2014) also investigates the relationship between Internet activism and Chinese economics. According to him, the conflict between China's authoritarian political system and its capitalistic economic system indicates that the government cannot afford to destroy its Internet economy by forbidding online public discussion.

Three online activism campaigns that leaded to offline changes have been scrutinized by scholars: Sun Zhigang incident[1] (Spring 2003), Wenzhou train collision[2] (July, 2011) and Wukan protest[3] (September and December, 2011). The heated discussion on BBS following the death of Sun Zhigang, appealed to the authorities to investigate the case and to criticize the unlimited police power and the injustice of the detention system. Under the pressure of online public opinion, the government abolished the 1982 detention regulation and replaced it with a new regulation prohibiting local state agencies from detaining people against their will or imposing charges on fines on them. The Sun Zhigang incident demonstrates the mobilizing power of a widely shared media- and Internet-led consensus on civil rights vis-à-vis the arbitrary power of the state and punitive bureaucratic culture of self-preservation and mutual protection (Zhao, 2008). And it is said to be the very first successful online activism campaign in China (Hassid,

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[1] Sun Zhigang incident refers to the 2003 death of the migrant worker Sun Zhigang in Guangzhou, as a result of physical abuse he suffered while being detained under China's custody and repatriation system.

[2] See Chapter 1 for the introduction of this event.

[3] Wukan protest was an anti-corruption protest that began in September 2011 and escalated in December 2011 with the expulsion of officials by villagers, the siege of the town by police, and subsequent détent in the southern Chinese village of Wukan

2012). After the train crash near Wenzhou happened on July 23, 2011, a total of 26 million

messages about this tragedy were posted online (Wines & LaFraniere, July 28, 2011). The online

discussion ultimately resulted in a reversed official stance and a more thorough investigation

(Hassid, 2012). This incident impressively demonstrates that the networked form of contention

enabled by microblogs have become a new and formidable element of Chinese popular

contention. The discussion on Weibo also demonstrates that online action explodes within hours

and fades away equally after a few days (Bondes & Schucher, 2014). Among the three cases, the

Wukan protest is most closely associated with politics. In this incident, Weibo functions as a

platform for local protesters to express their demand and for national netizens to communicate

their views. This function has facilitated the dissemination of information about politically

sensitive collective action and attracted national attention supporting the local protest (S. Jiang,

2016; Tong & Zuo, 2014).

Online public discussion is not restricted to politics-related topics. The recreational event

like Super Girl Singing Contest can also raise online debates, and the apolitical conversations

also have the potential to expand civic engagement (Wu, 2014). Weibo's function of

disseminating health-related knowledge during the anti-smoking social media campaign is also a

positive indicator of online activism (S. Jiang & Beaudoin, 2016).

As all the above cases show, social media give people new instruments of surveillance

vis-à-vis government institutions and thus force the party-state to increase its degree of

transparency. Social media provide Chinese citizens with a powerful, although qualified, tool to

organize online collective resistance (Noesselt, 2014).

To summarize, previous literature after disproving the plausibility of the overoptimistic

liberalist discourse, test the interplay between the state and citizens. From the state's perspective,

the Chinese government not only utilize the Internet and social media as a new form of governance but also employ informal censoring practices and formal regulations to monitor and control online public discussion. From citizen's perspective, Chinese netizens are well aware of their government's control over the Internet, and have developed different methods to avoid censorship and fight for a comparatively free cyberspace. Those efforts sometimes have successfully changed the government's policy and brought about social transformation. Recent studies have proved that simply measuring the existing Chinese public sphere against an ideal type that does not even exist anywhere in the world would cause us to make arbitrary evaluation and draw a hopelessly pessimistic conclusion (Liu & McCormick, 2011). The state-society relation in this debate have change from either/or dichotomy to both/ and logic (G. Yang, 2014).

Albeit the significant findings of previous research, there are two limitations. Firstly, although this chapter has listed a number of studies discussing social media's role in forming a public sphere in China, given that microblogging started relatively late in mainland China, related studies are still limited, especially compared with those of Twitter. Also, among the existing research, the number of empirical studies is inadequate. A considerable portion of studies are based on anecdotal evidence, which is the case in both English-based academia and Chinese-based academia. Communication scholar Bu Wei (2008) noted that despite 409 Chinese language papers on the Chinese Internet had been published between 1990 and 2008, only around 2% used content analysis, 1% employed fieldwork and an even smaller percentage relied on survey data. Consequently, more empirical case studies using scientific research methods are needed.

Recognizing the historical baggage of the Habermasian theory and the complicated cultural and historical background of China, we maintain a broad conception of the public sphere

in this study. Based on Habermas's ideal public sphere model, other scholars' revision as well as the interaction between Chinese government and social media, in this thesis, public sphere is defined as a public discussion platform collecting ordinary citizens' voices and delivering these voices to other citizens and even the state. But this sphere is not meant to be completely free. Government's intervention persists.

Chapter 3 Mixed Research Methods

This chapter introduces the research methods used in this thesis. To achieve a thorough understanding of the public discussion on Weibo related to the Zhou Yongkang incident, we use mixed methods: quantitative content analysis and qualitative critical discourse analysis. This chapter starts with an introduction to the data sampling logic and data collection procedure. After that, it discusses how the two research methods are used in this research. At the end of this chapter, we justify the plausibility and the advantage of using mixed methods.

3.1 Data Sampling and Collection

Due to the combination of content analysis and discourse analysis in this study, when we made the sampling decision, we kept the requirement of both the content analysis and the discourse analysis in mind in order to ensure the integrity of the data. At the same time, since quantitative research raises a much stricter requirement of sampling, especially whether the sampling is statistically representative, we followed the sampling criteria of quantitative content analysis. We started the data sampling and collection procedure with the consideration of unit.

Since discourse analysis is a qualitative method, it raises no requirement of the research unit. We paid more attention to the issue of the unit in content analysis. There are two types of unit that needs consideration: unit of observation and unit of analysis. Unit of observation in content analysis is the content unit, defined as a self-contained narrative or visual plus a supplemental textual, photographic, or graphic information that could be understood independently of other information surrounding it (Beam, 2003). It is the unit that is coded. In this study, the unit of observation is a syntactical unit (Kinppendorf, 2004). Syntactical units occur as discrete units in a language or medium that can carry meanings relevant to an audience (Riff, Lacy & Fico, 2014). To be explicit, it was any syntactical unit that can tell the audience a

particular Weibo post's attitude toward Zhou's case, the government and other officials (if applicable), and the sources (if applicable). Unit of analysis is the person, group, entity, or whatever that is being described or compared (Babbie, 2016). Sampling should be based on unit of analysis, not unit of observation. Therefore, in this research, unit of analysis was Weibo post. And our sampling was based on Weibo posts.

In this study, we used the multistage purposive sampling procedure. Purposive sampling (aka. judgmental sampling or relevance sampling) is a type of non-probability sampling in which the units to be analyzed are selected on the basis of the researcher's judgment about which ones will be the most useful or representative (Babbie, 2016, p.187). Multistage purposive sampling means choosing settings, groups, and/ or individuals representing a sample in two or more stages in which all stages reflect purposive sampling (Collins, Onwuegbuzie & Jiao, 2007). Despite the limitations of non-probability sampling in generating estimates or sampling error, they are often used in content analysis because an adequate sampling frame is not always available (Angel, 2011; Riff, Lacy & Fico, 2014, p.74). In a study by Rigge and Freitage (1997) of content analysis articles in *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* from 1971 to 1995, they found that 68.1% used purposive samples. Moreover, purposive sampling is also the most frequently used sampling logic in qualitative method (Gee & Handford, 2013; Sandelowski, 2000).

At the first stage of the multi-stage purposive sampling, we employed an often-used type of purposive sample, consecutive sampling, which involves taking a series of content produced during a certain time. Previous studies have proved that each public event has an active period during which people follow it closely. In general, online events are ephemeral, with the average active period lasting about fifteen days (Lu & Qiu, 2013; Yu, 2011). Consequently, we collected data within two time periods: (a) 15 days from July 29, 2014 (July 29— August 13), when

Xinhua News Agency released the news that Zhou was under internal investigation; (b) 15 days from June 11, 2015 (June 11— June 25), when Zhou was sentenced by the First Intermedia People's Court in Tianjin. Consecutive-day sampling is important when studying a continuing news or feature story because connected discussions cannot be examined adequately otherwise (Riff, Lacy & Fico, 2014). In order to examine Weibo users' opinions concerning Zhou's case, Weibo posts were examined through conducting keyword searches through the aforementioned time periods. Previous studies on Sina Weibo (Jiang & Beaudoin, 2016; Noesselt, 2014; Vuori & Paltemag, 2015; F. Yang, 2014) mainly used its Application Programming Interface (API) to collect data. However, Sina does not open its API for batch access to all related posts in a global scale (Zhang, 2016). Therefore, the collection of data will be mainly realized by the use of the built-in advanced search function of Sina Weibo. This function empowers researchers to process and list the posts according to the keywords, the time interval, geographical location, or in the combination of the prior three criteria (See figure 4). The keywords used for search are: "Zhou Yongkang" (周永康), "Giant Tiger" (大老虎[4]), "Master Kang" (康师傅), "Old Tiger" (老老虎), "Tiger Zhou" (周老虎) and "you know what I mean" (你懂的)[5]. The six terms have all been

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[4] Xi Jinpin remarked in early 2013 that, "in order to fight against corruption, we will beat both tigers and flies." (L. Ding, 2013) Tiger is a metaphor for corrupt senior officials. Fly is a metaphor for corrupt petty officials.

[5] Since the name of Zhou was still routinely censored at the time, the latter four keywords are used as a replacement of Zhou's name. The last one was used by a government spokesperson in March 2014 when he was asked by a reporter from Hong Kong if he could provide some information on the disappearance of Zhou. In response, the spokesman provided with a prepared party-line answer, and then remarked, "this is really all I can say in person to your question, I think you know what I mean" (你懂的). Afterward, "you know what I mean" became popular on Weibo and was used widely by the users when talking about Zhou's case.

used to refer to Zhou Yongkang. When we searched with "you know what I mean", "old tiger" and "Tiger Zhou," no result was returned. After the keyword searches, we gained 1,782 Weibo samples.

Figure 4. Weibo advanced search

Afterward, we conducted the second stage of purposive sampling. At this stage, we excluded any posts that did not really talk about Zhou Yongkang incident or expressed no opinion toward Zhou's case. Furthermore, we excluded any post that received less than three comments, three reposts or three likes because in public discussion the conversation should be multi-directional. Because the search results through web crawling and microblog scraping included duplicate results, we further refined the large sample. At last, we got a sample set of 352 Weibo posts. Since the minimum sample size recommended for correlational research is 82 samples for two-tailed hypothesis (Onwuegbuzie, Jiao & Bostick, 2004), our sample size is statistically representative.

3.2 Content Analysis

Quantitative content analysis is the systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurement rules, and the analysis of relationship involving these values using statistical methods, to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to its context, both the production and consumption (Riff, Lacy & Fico, 2014, p.19).

As media of communication, websites and web pages lend themselves prima facie to content analysis. Indeed, content analysis is one of the first methodologies used in web analysis, and it has been employed increasingly since (Herring, 2009). In 2000, McMillan (2000) made a case for employing the technique of content analysis to Web-based material by reviewing the then-19 studies that employed this methodology to online material. And the number of studies that utilized this technique for Web-based content has increased dramatically since 2000. On social media, the content is generated by users. Using content analysis instead of the traditional self-reporting approach, researchers ask "what the audience does to the media" rather than the traditional perspective of "what media do to the audience." (Moy, 2014)

McMillan provided five important guidelines for applying content analysis to studies in the online environment. According to McMillan (2000), researchers who utilize content analysis techniques to the Web-based content would first formulate the research question. The second step is to select the sample, and the third step is to define the categories, time frames, coding units and context units. The fourth step is to train coders and check the reliability of the work, and the fifth step is to analyze and interpret the data. Having finished the first three steps in the previous section, in this section, we explain this study's adopted methodology through reference to McMillan's fourth step for conducting content analysis on social media content.

3.2.1 Coders and variables

Analysis of previous media studies using content analysis demonstrates that the use of two coders can attain the best results (Van Gorp, 2010). In our study, two coders completed the coding process. The researcher was the primary coder, and a volunteer was the secondary coder. The volunteer is a Ph.D. student from a prestigious university in China having used Weibo for over three years, and whose native language is Chinese. He remained blind to the research questions and was trained to recognize Weibo users' attitudes toward Zhou's case, the government and other officials, and the sources, whether the attitudes are favorable, neutral or unfavorable. The secondary coder was also trained to distinguish original posts from reposts. All training was conducted according to the coding protocol (see Appendix A: Coding Protocol).

The variables that were coded are listed below:

Item number. The item number was randomly assigned by the researcher.

Item time period. In the previous section, we mentioned that samples of this study came from two time periods: July 29, 2014 to August 13, 2014 (period A), June 11, 2015 to June 25, 2015 (period B). This was the independent variable when we tested whether users' attitudes toward Zhou's case changed in the two time periods.

Attitude toward the Zhou Yongkang incident. This is the major variable in this study. The attitude can be favorable, neutral or unfavorable. The coders had been notified that we wanted to code users' attitudes toward this case, instead of the person.

Attitude toward the government or other officials. According to previous research on online discussions associated with corruption (Hassid, 2012; Nip & Fu, 2016; Zhou, 2009), netizens often express their attitudes toward the government or other officials in their posts. The attitude was also categorized as favorable, neutral or unfavourable.

Nature of the post. A post can either be an original post or a repost.

Type of source. This variable was only coded for reposts. It was the independent variable when we examined the correlation between a repost's attitude toward the source and the type of the source. Type of source means the social distribution of the writers of original posts that had been reposted. We categorized it as governmental actor and non-government actor. Governmental actors include government's official accounts (both local and central government), state-owned corporations' official accounts and state-owned news institutions' account. All the other were non-government actors, including all the private news institutions and foreign news institutions, for example, Phoenix Television.

Repost's opinion toward the source. It was the dependent variable when we examined the correlation between a repost's attitude toward the source and the type of the source. The opinion could either be positive or negative.

The coders received 5 hours training. After the first one hour, an intercoder reliability test (see the following section) was conducted and all the disagreement was further discussed between the two coders. After that, the training continued, and another intercoder reliability test was initiated at the final stage of the training. In real coding process, the primary coder (the researcher) coded 211 samples (60%), and the secondary coder coded 141 samples (40%).

3.2.2 Reliability and validity

For all quantitative research designs, reliability and validity are the two most significant criteria to tell whether a design is scientific or not. Reliability is defined as the extent of replicability, which is pursuing the same results through repeated measuring procedures (Neuendorf, 2002). Reliability is one of the most distinctive attributes of content analysis methodology comparing to other communication studies techniques. In content analysis, reliability is interpreted as intercoder reliability or intercoder agreement. Intercoder reliability is the term used to represent

that "the extent to which independent coders evaluate a characteristic of a message or artifact and reach the same conclusion" (Lombard, Snyder-Duch & Bracken, 2002, p.435). As Singletary put it, intercoder reliability is "near the heart of content analysis; if the coding is not reliable, the analysis cannot be trusted (1993, p.294).

Based on the definitions of all the variables, the first, second, fifth, and sixth variable are manifest content, whereas the third, fourth and seventh variable are latent content. Analysis of manifest content assumes that with the message "what you see is what you get." The meaning of the message is its surface meaning (Riff, Lacy & Fico, 2014, p.29). Latent message analysis is reading between the lines (Holsti, 1969, p.12). Manifest content involves denotative meaning. Latent content is the individual meaning given by individuals to symbols. The distinct feature of latent message "only increases the importance of making the case that the judgments of coders are intersubjective, that is, those judgments, while subjectively derived, are shared across coders, and the meaning therefore is also likely to reach out to readers of the research" (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999, p.266). Consequently, building intercoder reliability is one of the cardinal steps of this research.

To calculate the intercoder reliability, we need to first select the content for testing; then select one or more appropriate indices; afterward, we need to obtain the necessary tools to calculate the index or indices selected and select an appropriate minimum acceptable level of reliability for the index or indices (Lombard, Snyder-Duch & Bracken, 2002b).

As mentioned above, we did two reliability tests, one was in the middle of the training, the other was at the end of the training. The first one was more like a pretest test. So we just briefly talk about it. We randomly picked up thirty posts that expressed opinion toward Zhou's case but had fewer than three comments or three likes or three reposts, which means that those

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30 posts were not a part of the final sample. We calculated the reliability using Cohen's Kappa (see below) and got a result ranging from .6 to .92. In the rest of this section, we concentrate on the second reliability test, which determines the reliability of the research design.

To begin with, we selected the content for testing. Scholars have provided some arbitrary and ambiguous advice about how much content to use when establishing protocol reliability. Kaid and Wadsworth (1989) suggested that between 5% and 7% of the total is adequate. However, Wimmer and Dominick (2003) suggested that between 10% to 25% of the body of content should be tested. In this thesis, we used the formula provided by Riff, Lacy, and Fico (2014). This formula for the standard error is manipulated to solve for the sample size needed to achieve a given level of confidence (p.110). The formula is:

$$n = \frac{(N-1)(SE)^2 + PNQ}{(N-1)(SE)^2 + PQ}$$

In the formula:

N= the population size (number of sample in the study)

P= the population level of agreement

Q= (1-P)

n= the sample size for the reliability test

In this study, we assumed an acceptable minimal level of agreement of 85% and *P* of 90%. We further assumed a desired confidence level of .05. A two tailed test *z* score— the number of standard errors needed to include 95% of all possible sample means on agreement— is 1.96. Because the confidence level is 5% and our desired level of probability is 95%, SE is computed as follows:

.05= 1.96 (SE)

Using these numbers to determine the test sample size to achieve a minimum 85%

reliability agreement and assuming *P* to equal to 90% (5% above our minimum), the result is

n= 102

Since all the posts had been numerically ordered from 1 to 352, we used a random

number program to pick up 102 posts out of the 352 posts to test the intercoder reliability.

The second step is to select appropriate index or indices. In this study, we employed two

indices: Cohen's Kappa and Krippendorff's Alpha. Cohen's Kappa is a statistic which measures

inter-rater agreement for categorical items. It takes discrepancy of coders' distribution into

consideration by multiplicative marginal instead of additive marginal (Neuendorf, 2004). It was

reported as the most widely used index for reliability test (Babbie, 2016). Krippendorff's Alpha

index is particularly designed for content analysis intercoder reliability test and has been widely

used in content analysis since the 1970s (Krippendorff, 2004). It accounts for various sample

sizes and missing information. It can be applied to different levels of variables (nominal, ordinal,

interval, and ratio). We used both of the indices to guarantee the accuracy of the intercoder

reliability.

To calculate the two indices, we input the coding results for the 102 posts into the

Statistics Package for the Social Science (SPSS 21.0 for Mac). And the results are listed in table

2. The intercoder reliability of the variables ranged from .71 to 1.00 (Krippendorff's Alpha),

from 0.69 to 1.00 (Cohen's Kappa). Since Cohen's Kappa is a more conservative index, the

results are plausible. After calculating the indices, we needed to determine whether the results

were acceptable. However, there are no established standards. Nonetheless, Neuendorf (2002)

reviewed the works of several methodologists and suggested that "coefficients of .90 or greater

would be acceptable to all, .80 or greater would be acceptable for most situations, and below

that, there exists great disagreement" (p.145). But more liberal criteria are usually used for the

indices known to be more conservative (i.e., Krippendorff's Alpha and Cohen's Kappa)

(Lombard, Snyder-Duch & Bracken, 2004). Therefore, the achieved intercoder reliability in this

study is acceptable.

Table 2. Intercoder reliability test

Variable	Krippendorff's Alpha	Cohen's Kappa
Item time period	1.00	1.00
Attitude toward the dismissal of Zhou Yongkang	.89	.88
Attitude toward the government or other officials	.83	.81
Nature of the post	1.00	1.00
Type of source	.71	.69
Repost's opinion toward the source	.73	.69

After calculating the reliability indices, we briefly demonstrate the validity of this the

coding system. The validity of the measure used in this study was based upon its concurrent

validity (Kelly, Niederdeppe & Hornik, 2009). Two previous studies have used content analysis

to analyze Chinese netizens' attitudes toward corruption-related issues (Nip & Fu, 2016; Zhou,

2009). When we designed the coding system for this research, these two articles were consulted.

The classifications for variable also have face validity because the variables were clearly defined.

In summary, the content analysis research design of this research is both reliable and

valid. Moreover, in the analytical part, both descriptive analysis and Chi-square coefficient were

run to answer the first six question raised at the end of Chapter 1. Detailed statistics are discussed

in Chapter 4.

3.3 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis was used in this research to answer the last research question. Before introducing the type of discourse analysis that was used in this thesis, the critical discourse analysis, we firstly investigate the definition of discourse. "Discourse is a language or system of representation that has developed socially in order to make the circulate a coherent set of meanings about an important topic area" (Fiske, 1987, p.13). Dissimilar with content, discourse is more about the context than the text: choices made establish a particular representation in a certain fashion, the way those choices are understood, and analyzing the assumptions behind that representation. "Meaning is constructed within a given text by the placement of words next to other words, of images next to other images, or images and words together…in how the various components of the text sit in relation to each other" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 238). Accordingly, discourse is something beyond the text, but at the same time, it is based on the text. Broadly speaking, discourse analysis is the study of language in use. "It is the study of the meanings we give language and the actions we carry out when we use language in specific contexts. Discourse analysis is also sometimes defined as the study of language above the level of a sentence, of the ways sentences combine to create meaning, coherence, and accomplish purposes" (Gee & Handford, 2013, p.1).

In the next paragraphs, we further illustrate the critical discourse analysis and how it was carried out in this study.

Martin and Kodak (2003) pointed out that critical discourse analysis had never been one single specific theory or methodology. No single theory or method is uniform and consistent throughout critical discourse analysis (See Meyer, 2002; Fairclough, 2003; and Weiss and Kodak, 2003). As Titscher et al. (2000) remarked, no matter which type of critical discourse analysis it is, "It is not concerned with language or language use per se, but with the linguistic

character of social and cultural processes and structures (p.146). Considering that the topic of this thesis is to examine social media's role in facilitating public discussion and forming a cyber public sphere, which is political, we employed Fairclough's critical discourse analysis frame.

According to Fairclough, critical discourse analysis is a tool that moves beyond the discourse of a text to look at the particular assumptions that inform and shape those discursive elements. "The formal properties of a text can be regarded from the perspective of discourse analysis on the one hand as traces of the productive process, and on the other hand as cues in the process of interpretation" (1989, p. 24). A trace reveals the assumptions and power relations that inform the creation and establishment of representation in a text. A cue occurs when a representation invites the audience to interpret what is represented in a certain way. In critical discourse analysis, a certain discursive element contains traces and cues. These are the assumptions and power relations that shape a representation and emit outward from representation at the same time. "As well as being determined by social structures, discourse has effects upon social structures and contributes to the achievement of social continuity or social change" (p. 37). A critical discourse analysis of social media seeks to study how these factors work together to create a message or messages to the public. "In seeking language as discourse and as social practice, one is committing oneself… to analyzing the relationships between texts, processes, and their social conditions… the relationship between texts, interactions, and contexts" (p.36). In the context of studying netizens' discussion around the Zhou Yongkang incident on Weibo, this means examining frames of netizens' discussion and exploring the ideologies and assumptions behind those images. We put the Weibo posts into a broader social, cultural and political context in order to scrutinize what the netizens were actually talking about.

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Critical discourse analysis enabled us to ask how the frames of public discussion fall in existing frames, or challenge and transform those frames.

Critical discourse analysists believe that discourse is both constitutive and constituted (Fairclough, 1989, 2003; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Discourse is a form of social practice which both constitutes the social world and is constituted by other social practices. As social practices, discourse is in a dialectical relationship with other social aspects. Discourse reflects social structures. Zhou Yongkang's trial and the severe corruption problem are social practices. The Weibo users' opinions toward Zhou's case were reflections of such social practices and their previous life experience. Through using critical discourse analysis, we explored the links between language use and social practice.

Furthermore, before we explain the detailed steps used to perform the critical discourse analysis, there is one more concept that is closely associated with social media studies, intertextuality. Intertextuality refers to the linkage of all texts to other text, both in the past and in the present (Kodak, 2013, p.529). The online public discussion examined in this thesis was triggered by information concerning Zhou's case which had been released by news institutions. From one perspective, all the posts were linked to the original news. From another perspective, those reposts were linked to their source. So the discourse on social media is interlocking, like *Snake*, the video game that has been popular since the late 1970s.

The critical discourse analysis used in this thesis is grounded in the three primary steps presented by Fairclough (1989). It started with description, moved to interpretation, and concluded with explanation. In the context of this project, description involved identifying and presenting different frames of discussion on Weibo concerning Zhou's case. In content analysis, we had categorized users' attitudes into three categories. In discourse analysis, we concentrated

on the posts that expressed unfavorable attitudes and further investigated their discourse frames. We only looked into the posts that conveyed negative views of the Zhou Yongkang incident for two reasons. Firstly, the approach of critical discourse analysis aims to analyze the discourses that challenge prevailing assumptions (Fairclough, 2013; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). In the context of the Zhou Yongkang incident, the prevailing assumption was that corruption among officials had become a parlous social problem in China, government's attempt to fight against corruption would receive support and compliment from citizens. The posts that conveyed negative attitudes challenged this assumption. Additionally, the majority previous empirical studies that investigated how netizens responded to the government's measures to solve social problems only employed content analysis, stating the frequency of negative opinions, without looking into the specific discourses.

Interpretation is the phase where analysis moved away from what was directly stated in the post about Zhou's case in order to explore what assumptions or social practices informed those frames. The final stage was explanation. Different from the inflexional feature of Indo-European languages, Chinese language relies on meaning agreement and is characterized by high context (Shi-xu, 2013, p.647). Consequently, we conducted the discourse analysis in a culture-specific and holistic way. In this study, we linked the discourse to China's social and historical context for the purpose to explain why some frames left the government's party-line and even challenged it.

3.4 Mixed methods

According to the previous two sections, we summarized major features of quantitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis as following:

Quantitative content analysis is an appropriate method for arranging texts into a unified and generalized coding structure which, in turn, can be easily transformed into a database. Through applying this method, a researcher can delineate trends, present frequencies and test differences between groups. Critical discourse analysis is an interpretative method focusing on textual and structural features of texts and how actors mobilize different topics and discursive structures. Through using this method, a researcher can reveal how various actors give different interpretations to a particular social practice and how this practice is used as a specific discursive strategy.

The aim of the content analysis in this thesis is to quantitatively map the different opinions expressed by netizens based on a pre-fixed coding theme, whereas, the critical discourse analysis represents a more analytical and interpretative process.

Scholars have thoroughly investigated the differences between these two commonly used methods in communication studies (Fierke, 2004; Géring, 2015; Herrera & Braumoeller, 2014; Hopf, 2004). They concentrated on their different ontological standpoints and different epistemology approaches. Noticing the philosophical gap between them, we argue here that the similarities between the two approaches make the mixed methods plausible.

First of all, in their review of discourse analysis, Jørgensen and Philips (2002) stated that "it is possible to create one's own package by combining elements from different discourse analytical perspectives, and if appropriate, nondiscourse analytical perspectives" (p.4). Their remark indicates that discourse analysis does not reject other analytical approaches. Secondly, there is a common ground in considering both discourse analysis and content analysis— "There are no unmediated data" (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p.83). Researchers using discourse attempt to fully disclose their mediation through rich discussion of the "backgrounds." Those using content

analysis attempt to minimize their mediation through adherence to the scientific method, including an aim toward intersubjectivity, if not objectivity. Both content analysists and discourse analysists agree that there is no way to separate meaning from context and any attempt to count must deal with the precarious nature of meaning. Moreover, content analysis and discourse analysis both are concerned with drawing conclusions about some aspect of human communication from a carefully selected set of message. Although their approach is different, their findings can ultimately fit together quite nicely, providing a good example of triangulation of methods (Neuendorf, 2004). Lastly, content analysis and discourse analysis have a similar research logic: categories can only emerge from the data (Hardy, Harley & Phillips, 2004). These four points together prove the compatibility of content analysis and discourse analysis.

However, albeit the compatibility of these two approaches, why did we bother to use both of them? That is because using either one of them alone can only provide us a partial picture, whereas through using both of them we can gain a complete picture of research questions.

For content analysis, the problem is what is gained or lost in the translation into number. What is gained is credibility within a world of science that values quantification over other forms of analysis and one in which the word "scientific" has acquired the meaning of using quantification. What is potentially lost is the very human, social and political process by which actors call the world around them into question (Fierke, 2004). What is lost in content analysis can be brought back through discourse analysis because of the latter one's focus on context. For discourse analysis, the method allows an in-depth exploration of latent message, however, it relies on the interpretation of the interpreter who determines how the audience should understand the subject matter (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This limitation of discourse analysis can be made

up by the intersubjective characteristic of content analysis through the participation of multiple coders.

Using discourse analysis as a complement to content analysis allows the discovery of the diversity and texture of communication (Feltham-King & Macleod, 2016). Discourse analysis provides a richer source of contextual data, and "provides a big picture of a realm of communication activity, ostensibly leaving no stone unturned in consideration for all critical messages" (Neuendorf, 2004, pp.24). Such a variety of collection is not usually conducted in content analysis. Consequently, the underlying logic for the mixed methods in the study was to yield a comprehensive understanding across the dataset and to allow for the multifaceted and historically contingent character of the phenomenon under study to be revealed (Greene, 2008).

Through utilizing the mixed methods, the same post can take on different meanings and paly different roles in the text. The following example illustrates this effect:

> Someone asked, Zhou Yongkang had embezzled more than one hundred million yuan, why did he just receive a life sentence? Why not just execute him by shooting? If Zhou were a petty cadre, wouldn't he be sentenced to death? Well, maybe this is the demonstration of how "humane" our country is. Politics is complex. And law is flexible. Petty cadres can be directly dragged out and shot. When dealing with senior officials, you have to consider the interest groups behind him and nepotism, to consider the feelings of some senior comrades, and to take care of their health.

In the case of content analysis, we check the post's attitude toward Zhou's case, whether it expressed opinion toward other officials and the government, and whether it is an original post. Conversely, in the case of critical discourse analysis, we investigate what frame of discourse existed in in the post, how it questioned Zhou's trial, and why it did that. In this example, "how 'human' our country is", "politics is complex", "law is flexible" and "interest groups behind him and nepotism" are the syntactical units that answer those questions. After interpretation, we

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know that the writer of this post questioned the legitimacy of Zhou's trial and he/she thought the

reason why Zhou was not sentenced to death was the interest struggle among elite politicians.

We collect and analyze data by following these coding and interpreting steps from post to post

and from sentence to sentence.

In sum, despite the philosophical inconsistency between quantitative content analysis and

discourse analysis, these two methods share several similarities making them compatible with

each other. Through using mixed research methods, the conclusions of this thesis are

strengthened multi-fold.

Chapter 4 Content and Discourse

Chapter 4 represents the results of data analysis. It starts with the statistical results of content

analysis, in which process the first three sets of research questions are answered and three

hypotheses are tested. Afterward, it reports two major frames of discourse and one minor one

discovered through critical discourse analysis.

4.1 Content of Public Discussion on Weibo

4.1.1 RQ1a-1b: attitudes toward the Zhou Yongkang incident

Chinese microbloggers intensively responded to Zhou's case in both of the two time periods. As

indicated by table 3, after Xinhua News Agency released the news that Zhou had been under

internal investigation, 237 posts concerning this information received more than three comments

or three likes or were reposted more than three times within 15 days. After the final result of

Zhou's trial was announced, the netizens showed less enthusiasm with only 115 posts receiving

more than three comments or three likes, or being reposted more than three times within 15 days.

Table 3. Description of sample

Keyword	Time period A (July 29— August 13, 2014)	Time period B (June 11— June 25, 2015)
周永康	160	83
周老虎	0	0
大老虎	76	10
康师傅	1	22
老老虎	0	0
你懂的	0	0

Table 3. Description of sample (cont.)

Overall	237	115

To answer the RQ1a, we run descriptive statistics. The table 4 showed that 121 posts (34.4%) expressed a favorable attitude toward this event, 146 posts (41.5%) expressed an unfavorable attitude toward it, the other 85 posts (24.1%) showed neutral attitude. Therefore, Sina Weibo users' overall attitude toward Zhou's case was unfavorable indicating that they were not satisfied with how the central government deals with the malfeasance of Zhou Yongkang.

Table 4. Attitudes toward the Zhou Yongkang incident

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Favorable	121	34.4	34.4	34.4
	Neutral	85	24.1	24.1	58.5
	Unfavorable	146	41.5	41.5	100.0
	Total	352	100.0	100.0	

For the purpose to test whether the public opinion on Sina Weibo altered over the time, we run a correlation test. Because all the variables in this study were categorical and discrete, and they were not normally distributed, we used Chi-Square Test of Association. Based on the results (see table 5), we stated that there was no statistical association between Weibo users' attitudes toward Zhou's case and the time period ($X^2(2) = 1.65$, $p=.438$). This means that the overall attitude of the public discussion on Sina Weibo did not changed significantly over the time.

Table 5. Chi-Square tests of attitudes toward Zhou's case and time period

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.649[a]	2	.438
Likelihood Ratio	1.667	2	.434
Linear-by-Linear Association	.950	1	.330
N of Valid Cases	352		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 26.08.

In summary, Sina Weibo users responded relatively negatively to the Zhou Yongkang incident and their attitudes did not change significantly over the two time periods.

4.1.2 RQ2a-2b: attitudes toward the government and other officials

In order to analyze whether and how Weibo users offered opinions toward the government and other officials when they discussed Zhou's case, we used descriptive statistics. According to Table 6, there were 56 posts (15.9%) that did not mention the users' attitudes toward the government and other officials. Among the other 296 posts (84.1%), only 75 posts (25.3%) expressed favorable opinion toward the government and other officials, the other posts either responded negatively (69.3%) or showed neutral attitude (5.4%).

After running a Chi-Square Test of Association Test between netizens' attitudes toward the Zhou Yongkang incident and those toward the government and other officials (see table 7), we found that there was a statistically significant association between these two variables ($X^2(4) = 169.77, p < .001$). This result demonstrates that when a post responded negatively toward toward Zhou's case, it was more likely to express an unfavorable attitude toward the government and other officials than to express a favorable attitude.

Table 6. Attitudes toward the government and other officials

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Favorable	75	21.3	25.3	25.3
	Neutral	16	4.5	5.4	30.7
	Unfavorable	205	58.2	69.3	100.0
	Total	296	84.1	100.0	
Missing	System	56	15.9		
Total		352	100.0		

Table 7. Chi-Square tests of attitudes toward Zhou's case and toward the government

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	169.766[a]	4	.000
Likelihood Ratio	188.925	4	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	139.265	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	296		

a. 1 cells (11.1%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.68.

To conclude, a number of Sina Weibo users conveyed their opinion toward the government and other officials when they responded to Zhou's case, and their attitudes were overall unfavorable. Moreover, their attitudes toward Zhou Yongkang incident were correlated to their opinions toward the government and other officials.

4.1.3 RQ3a-3b: Source and standpoint

Twenty percent of the sample posts (71 of 352) were found to be reposts from other sources. Among the 71 reposts, 45 posts (63.4%) came from governmental actors' posts, the other 26 (36.6%) were reposted from non-government actors' posts. In addition, there were more reposts

(56.9%) expressing positive attitude toward their source than those (43.1%) showed negative

opinions (table 8 to table 10). These figures suggest that Sina Weibo users are less prone to relied

on other sources for their discussion on the corruption-related event. Also, when they did repost

other's posts, they are more likely to turn to governmental actors, and they offered fairly critical

responds.

Table 8. Nature of the post

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Original Post	281	79.8	79.8	79.8
	Repost	71	20.2	20.2	100.0
	Total	352	100.0	100.0	

Table 9. Type of source

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Governmental Actor	45	12.8	63.4	63.4
	Non-government Actor	26	7.4	36.6	100.0
	Total	71	20.2	100.0	
Missing	System	281	79.8		
Total		352	100.0		

Table 10. Repost's opinion toward the source

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Positive	31	8.8	43.1	43.1
	Negative	41	11.6	56.9	100.0
	Total	72	20.5	100.0	
Missing	System	280	79.5		
Total		352	100.0		

Furthermore, as illustrated in table 11, there was a significant correlation between reposts' opinions toward the source and the type of the source ($X^2(1) = 14.43$, $p < .001$). This result showed that the type of the source had an influence on a repost's attitude toward it.

Table 11. Chi-Square tests of repost's opinion and type of source

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	14.429[a]	1	.000		
Continuity Correction[b]	12.604	1	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	14.801	1	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				.000	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	14.226	1	.000		
N of Valid Cases	71				

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 11.35.
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

Summarily, only a small portion of Sina Weibo users reposted from other sources, and they were more likely to repost governmental actors' posts and responded critically. What's more, whether a repost agreed or disagreed with its source was associated with whether its source was a governmental actor or a non-government actor.

Based on these statistical findings, we looked back to the three hypotheses raised at the end of Chapter 1. We failed to find enough evidence to reject the null hypothesis of H1, meaning that there did not exist a statistically significant association between Weibo users' attitudes toward the Zhou Yongkang incident and the time period. However, aware of the Type I error, we could not conclude that those microbloggers attitudes did not change over time. We successfully rejected the null hypotheses of H2 and H3. We figured out that when a post expressed a unfavorable attitude toward Zhou's case, it was more likely to express similarly unfavorable attitude toward the government and other officials. In addition, how Weibo users responded to the sources in their reposts was affected by the type of the sources.

4.2 *Frames of Discourse*

As mentioned in Chapter 3, in this study we used critical discourse analysis to describe, interpret, and explain the discourse frames of those posts that expressed unfavorable attitudes toward Zhou's case in the purpose of investigating how they challenged the pre-existing party-line. We found two major frames of discourse through the two time periods, which are further explicated in the following paragraphs. All the posts quoted in this section were translated into English by the researcher. The original Chinese version can be found in Appendix C.

4.2.1 Questioning the legitimacy of Zhou's investigation and his trial.

This frame of discourse had started before the news that Zhou was under internal investigation was released on July 29, 2014. The sudden disappearance of Zhou from public sight raised a lot of guesses among people. Considering that the frequent exposure of China's high-ranked officials on state media would not fade away within the first several years of their retirement, the silence of state media, in turn, attracted people's attention. After the information was announced, people at first reacted by saying "See, that's what I have said!" But later, they felt puzzled. Ever since Xin Jinping came to power at the end of 2012, his had expressed extremely tough attitude against corruption. Corruption was intolerable for both the central government and ordinary citizens. It had raised severe tension between the government officials and citizens. Then why did the government and the state media keep silent for more than half a year about Zhou's wrongdoing? Wasn't it more reasonable for the media to expose his crime and criticize the severe corruption issue? When all the doubts and questions were added up by the netizens, they turned to question whether the government's way of dealing with Zhou's case was justifiable and legitimate. For example, a lawyer named "Lawyer Xiangbing" (向兵律师)commented on an editorial article on *People's Daily* on August 6, 2014:

> *People's Daily*: Zhou Yongkang case has been finalized as early as the end of 2013. As the title said, the case has long been drawn a conclusion like putting a cover on a coffin, then the court trial happens afterward is just to dug a pit for the coffin. I am not questioning the justifiability of the case, but rather the legitimacy of the handling. Court trial is the cover of the "coffin", and only the court is eligible to cover the coffin. This is what "rule of law" means.

Some netizens raised questions about the huge time gap between Zhou's disappearance and the news. For instance, user "Fansu Ivana" (樊素 Ivana) posted on July 30, 2014, no more than one day after the message was announced:

> # CCP breaks it convention and investigates Zhou Yongkang# of #3D News Talking# The curtain is finally opened. What I care about is: Why was it announced at this time? How to convict? In economic name only? Will the court session be public? Were flight delays related to this? What is the significance of onlookers? There has been more than a year from rumors to the release, what kind of public opinion strategy did the rulers adopt? Why?

User "Muzi Laolong" posted on the same day as "Fansu Ivana", using sarcasm to express his scornful attitude:

> We had known long ago that he sucked, but we knew that the top did not allow us to know, so we pretended not to know, waiting for the time when the government orders "now, you can know". Then we celebrate the falling down of the giant tiger singing and dancing. After this, to protect us from harm, we should wait for the approval from the government about what we should know and what we should not know. What a lovely county it is!

Later, another user, "Nanji ganliang" (南极干粮) posted on August 10, 2014:

> Last night I carefully watched the documentary of Zhou's case. I suddenly realized the unprecedented authority of rumors. What happened between the beginning of last year and the occurrence of the case confirms that rumor is actually "far-ahead prophecy".

From these four posts, we found that the news was not news at all. People were just waiting for the government to tell them that their guess was right. They were curious about why the government chose this day to announce the news. The message behind the text of this post was that there must be some backstage things that the government did not say in its official news. What were those backstage things? If those things were "ugly," were the ugly stuff instead of the

central government's determination to fight against corruption leading to the investigation of Zhou's wrongdoing? The user "Fansu Ivana" was curious about whether the trial would be open to the public, which was also another user's concern. User "Shi Pengpeng" (施鹏鹏) wrote on July 29, 2014:

> I do not know if Zhou Yongkang's case will be tried publicly as a response to the thrust of the Fourth Plenary Session of the "Rule of Law"? But the first question is: all the officials in the national political and judicial system in theory have to be avoided, will a special court be formed?

This user was eager to know whether Zhou would be tried publicly. However, the unstated message of his post was: even if Zhou were tried publicly, it was because the government wanted to respond to its own slogan of "Rule of Law." Their posts also implied that the broader anti-corruption campaign initiated by President Xi Jinping hardly relied on the legal system to investigate and punish officials. These two users' concern was proved to be reasonable when Xinhua News Agency suddenly announced the result of Zhou's trial in June 2015. If this issue was just a concern during the first period, it turned out to the real point of the issue during the second period. The closed-door trial contributed to the netizens' question of its outcome.

Netizens questioned the procedural justice of this court trial. People still had a fresh memory of Bo Xilai's trial[6] in 2013, the proceedings of which were relayed in real-time by the court's official microblog account. Compared with the publicity of Bo's trial, the closed-door trial of Zhou Yongkang added the mysteriousness of this incident. In addition, when the court

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[6] Bo Xilai is a Chinese former politician. He served as a member of the Central Politburo and secrety of the Communist Party's Chongqing branch. On 22 September, 2013, Bo was found guilty of corruption, stripped of all his assets, and sentenced to life imprisonment.

announced life imprisonment sentence of Zhou, he immediately stated that he chose not to appeal with a quite calm facial expression. The two factors added together made the whole court trail look at a re-rehearsed performance.

User "Mingjing duanfang" (明镜端方) wrote on June 11, 2015:

Giant tiger is not open tried. He was sentenced to life imprison but did not appeal. This can only indicate that it had already been a settlement. The newspapers just need to announce it.

Another user "FirCST" posted at the same day in a sarcastic tone:

The trial of Master Kang was so boring… He was as compliant as a cat… The verdict so is awkward… "The amount of bribes is particular great" ~Wow~ "After the incident, he voluntarily asked his relatives to return the embezzled money" ~Oh~ "The crime of abuse of power is particularly serious" ~Scary~ "The crime of deliberately reveal state secrets is particularly serious" ~Not good~ "But (he) did not cause particularly serious consequences" ~Sigh~

Besides questioning the procedural justice of this trial, netizens thought that life sentence was far less enough compared to what Zhou Yongkang has did. They were curious about why Zhou did not received a death penalty. For instance, user "Yunshi laodao" (陨石老刀) wrote a post on June 12, 2015, which was reposted for more than three hundred times. He said:

#When you feel unjust, you speak it out# According to the news report on June 12: "Zhou Yongkang received a life sentence", my comment is: even though he is convicted such severe crimes, he was not sentenced to death. Only a life sentence?! If he makes some contributions in prison and has his prison sentences commuted, he will be free in about ten years. Or if he requests to be released on bail for medical service, he will not even have to go "into" the prison. This kind of anti-corruption makes people feel disappointed and makes corrupted official feel at ease!!! (emoji: [Toasted])

In addition to just posting those words and using an emoji, the user added a picture to his/ her post. There were eight characters written on that picture, "贪官不死 人民心死" (if corrupted officials do not die, people will be disheartened.) Another post also expressed netizens' rage toward the sentence that Zhou received. User "Daiyan 14" (代言 14) remarked on June 15, 2015:

> Zhou Yongkang not only took bribes of more than 100 million RMB but also disclosed state secrets, but he was ONLY sentenced to life imprison! It means that there is no capital offence for government and Party cadres who take more than 100 million RMB bribes! Does law still have deterrence?

People not only expressed that they felt perplexed and irritated toward the outcome of Zhou's trial in the public discussion, but also tried to solve the puzzle. Again, they made some guesses. Although we did not know whether their guess was right, the following sample post indicated that netizens had extended their irritation toward this single trail to the whole political and judicial system in China. User "Incantations of Sharjah" (沙迦的咒语) noted:

> Someone asked, Zhou Yongkang had embezzled more than one hundred million yuan, why did he just receive a life sentence? Why not just execute him by shooting? If Zhou were a petty cadre, wouldn't he be sentenced to death? Well, maybe this is the demonstration of how "humane" our country is. Politics is complex. And law is flexible. Petty cadres can be directly dragged out and shot. When dealing with senior officials, you have to consider the interest groups behind him and nepotism, to consider the feelings of some senior comrades, and to take care of their health.

The post pointed out that the reason why Zhou was probed in the course of the anti-corruption campaign and the reason why Zhou was not sentenced to death were his connection with retired Party leaders. The hidden message is that the selectiveness of this anti-corruption

campaign's targets as well as the punishment received by those target was merely a camouflage for power struggle- a tool for Xi's government to remove its political opponents.

Severe corruption has long been an untimed bomb in Chinese society. When the government determined to punish a corrupted official, it should have received more compliment than criticism. However, the way the government deal with Zhou Yongkang's case triggered people's discontent. According to the cited sample posts, people's rage was not just about this incident. If we take social tension between officials and common people into consideration, it is plausible to say that netizens were disappointed by the government's long-time nonfeasance on the anti-corruption campaign, its leniency toward corrupted officials and the unjust judicial system. After President Xi Jinping vowed to crack down on both senior leaders and low-level bureaucrats- or "tigers" and "flies" as he put it- after he was elected to the post of CCP General Secretary, dozens of powerful leaders, along with a number of low-level officials, had been put under investigation, indicted, or convicted. However, people were not satisfied with this anti-corruption campaign whose scale and intensity had been unprecedented and intense. The assumption of people's criticism is that it is the government and law's obligation to penalize those corrupted officials. When the government fails to perform its duty, or when its performance is below people's standard, the online public discussion will not be circumscribed by the party; it will convey dissident opinions.

In this discourse frame, another group of posts needs further attention. For instance, a user named "MrLeto" reposted a piece of news from Phoenix News. The news was another case that was also adjudged on June 11, 2015. In that case, a man who witnessed his wife being raped hacked the perpetrator to death with a kitchen knife. He was also sentenced to life imprison. "MrLeto" compared those two trials and posted on June 15, 2015:

[Phoenix News: A man witness wife being raped, killing the raper with a kitchen knife]. Let's see who comes out of the prison first, the man or Zhou Yongkang. Reposted from Phoenix News App.

Two trials, same outcome. Without much knowledge of Chinese Criminal Law, we could not judge whether the two trials were fair. It is clear that the netizens who posted microblogs about these two cases thought that the judicial system failed them twice. It was too lenient toward the corrupted and evil senior official, but too ruthless toward this poor and fearless husband.

To sum up, posts falling in the discourse frame of "Questioning the legitimacy of Zhou's investigation and his trial", pointed out four doubtable issues of the way that the government treated this incident. First of all, they questioned the silence of the government and state media before broadcasting the investigation toward Zhou. Secondly, they questioned the tone of state media which made the whole incident like a backstage game. They also questioned the procedure justice of the court trial. Lastly, they cast doubt on the outcome of the trial. All of the four points indicate that some of the Chinese netizens had been accustomed to challenging the government's party-line and express their dissident views. And there was heteronomous voices in the same discourse frame. Their comments went beyond the case itself and turned against the government and the judicial system. There is an old proverb in China, killing a chicken in front of a monkey, which means punish someone less powerful as a warning to the powerful others. In the Zhou Yongkang incident, the central government intended to imprison the monkey as a warning to the chickens. Nevertheless, what the people wanted is not only to "kill" both the monkey and the chickens but also to "kill" them in a justifiable way. The conflict between the government's behavior and common citizens' wish brought about netizens' doubts.

4.2.2 It has nothing to do with me!

The second dominant frame of discourse through the two time periods was the frame of "It has nothing to do with me." Corruption is one of the most severe social tensions in China, but it is just one issue. Netizens who held this opinion thought that punishing one high-ranked official would not benefit common citizens. They believed that there were other social problems, only through solving these problems could the government bring benefits to people's life. For example, user "Ma Xicong" (马锡聪) posted on August 1, 2014:

Last night I went out to have my shoes repaired. The cobbler was quite talkative, so I asked his point of view of Zhou Yongkang's case. The cobbler asked me questions as reply. He asked, "Will punishing these tigers make real estate less expensive and bring down prices? Will it prevent people from dying from bulldozing? Will it protect common people from being bullied by evil officials? If not, then what is the point of punishing the tigers?

User "er-duochen" (er-朵陈) noted on August 7, 2014:

Regardless of Zhou Yongkang and Xu Caihou[7], even if all the corrupted officials are investigated and punished, it seems that it has nothing to do with our common people. What we want is not to investigate corrupted officials, or to shock the United States with weapons, or to make the Europe Union scared. What we want is that we can afford to buy an apartment, to pay for our medical bills, to get education. What we want is safe food, low gas price and unpolluted air. What we want is a just and fair social regulation system. We do not want to only live happily in the *CCTV News*! Anyone agreeing with me please repost this.

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[7] Xu Caihou was a general in the People's Liberation Army of China and vice chairman of the Central Military Commission, China's top military council. Xu retired from office in March 2013. He was detained and put under investigation on suspicion at bribery in March 2014. He died of bladder cancer before being tried in March 2015.

Apparently, a lot of netizens held a similar opinion with "er-duochen". This piece of microblog was reposted and commented 217 times. Different from people who questioned the legitimacy of Zhou's case, this group of microbloggers did not challenge the government's approach of punishing Zhou. Instead, they thought that the government's anti-corruption moves were useless and that common people should not celebrate Zhou's stepping down because one corrupt official being penalized would not benefit to common people. Some of these netizens viewed Zhou's case as a public display of political struggle among senior officials instead of as the government's attempt to fight against corruption. User "Hi, let's save the Earth together" (嗨一起拯救地球吧) posted on July 30, 2014:

> Does the giant tiger being knocked off have anything to do with me? Will prices fall? Will housing prices drop? Will food be safer? I do not want to kick the politician when he was down. Who knows whether it is just a war to get rid of dissidents.

Another user, "once a legend" (曾经的一个传说) thought punishing one big tiger would not make a big difference because the foundation that caused corruption still persisted. He wrote on July 31, 2014:

> Does this magical country lack such a joke? Is a giant tiger's falling down worth cheering? Wake up, please! Do we have less tax and more rights? Do we have a ballot paper? Has our social status changed? Can we tell the truth? No! Nothing has ever changed. As long as the foundation that caused corruption is there, as long as the feces are there, no one can stop the maggots from chasing each other!

All of the four quoted posts mentioned the social problems that netizens thought as more important than corruption by the netizens. The problems are unaffordable prices, unsafe food, severe pollution, lack of human rights. In contrast to the first group of netizens, the writers of

these posts went further away from the government's party-line. The unstated discourse of their posts was that the government's anti-corruption campaign was ineffective, it would not solve any "real" problem.

What is interesting is that some other netizens criticized this frame of discourse. For instance, user "Brother Li Gen's scarf" (李根哥哥的围脖) said on June 16, 2015:

Does the giant tiger being knocked off have anything to do with me? Many people asked this question on self-media. Actually, this question is not stupid, people are just numb now. Chinese people, who were most enthusiastic about politics, now only discuss and speculate political issues as outsiders after all the approaches to political participation were cut off. A number of people do not even believe in the most crucial words in political life, such as justice and fairness. They only care who won, who lost. This is the philosophy of monkeys.

In this post, the writer thought that people should care about anti-corruption campaign. However, he/she did not blame the common people for the negligence. He believed that the reason why people disregarded politics was that they had no way participate in politics. In other words, their thoughts and their words can hardly turn into social practices. The post further implied that it is the authoritarian political system that contributed to the discourse frame of "It has nothing to do with me."

User "the tail of wind, a writer in Yunnan" (云南写手风之末端), however, did not think that online discussion warranted much attention. He/ she held the view that whether the government had taken anti-corruption measures or not, people would never be satisfied. He/ she posted on July 30, 2014:

Anyway, the Internet is the place where everyone talks nonsense. If the giant tiger were not arrested, someone would say that the government does not fight against corruption. When the tiger was arrested, people say this is not the real anti-corruption. Both sound reasonable. Just let them talk.

The critics of this discourse posted their opinions online, forming a conversation between proponents and opponents of this frame. According to Michael Warner, public is a social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse (Warner, 2002). Those microbloggers formed a functional public around this frame of discourse.

To summarize, the discourse frame of "It has nothing to do with me!" indicated that some netizens disregarded government's anti-corruption moves and pointed out other more critical issues in their daily life. Through this discourse, they were actually urging the government to contemplate and make efforts to solving those issues in order to bring real benefits to their life.

4.2.3 Minor frames

In addition to the two major discourse frames, there were some other minor frames. Those minor frames shared three common characteristics: they were initiated by the news, they were timely and temporary, and they only existed in one period. In this section we use one minor frame as an example. A minor frame of discourse appeared on the day when the *CCTV News* broadcasted the image of Zhou's court trial on the evening of June 11, 2015. Zhou was grey-haired, dressed in a black jacket, standing at the dock. This picture of Zhou made a sharp contrast with the pictures of him before the investigation and trial. The image of a tired grey-haired old man being tried and sentenced to life imprison made some of the netizens feel sympathetic toward him. For example, user "A fish wants to say" (鱼说还休) said at the night of June 11, 2015:

> #Zhou Yongkang was sentenced to life imprison# I did not see a zestful secretary Zhou… I only saw a grizzled old man… Even if you are a criminal, or you were once a high-ranking official…

Another user "WHY is Wang Haiyi" (WHY 是王海怡) posted on June 11, 2015:

#Zhou Yongkang was sentenced to life imprison# I feel it hasn't been a long time. The once powerful Zhou Yongkang is grey-haired now. Seeing him like this, I feel a little helpless. What is the aim of human's life?

Among the people who felt sympathetic toward Zhou, some thought although he looked vulnerable, he deserved it. User "Fuxing vvv" (福星 vvv) wrote on June 11, 2015:

#Zhou Yongkang was sentenced to life imprison# Yongkang will not live happily forever[8]. What is the point of embezzling so much money? At the end, he was so regretful that his hair all turned grey within one night. Standing in a court where he used to manage, now he has turned to be a criminal. For human, no matter how high-ranked your social status is, if you only live for your own desires, the retribution will come sooner or later. Morality is the basis of being a human, and law is both the bottom line and the high-voltage line! This reflects that old saying: justice may be late, but it will never be absent!

The reason why a picture of grey-haired Zhou Yongkang triggered people's compassion lies in China's long history of respecting the seniors. Confucius once said, "They are (Confucius' wishes –added by the researcher), in regard to the aged, to give them rest; in regard to friends, to show them sincerity; in regard to the young, to treat them tenderly (Legge, 1869, p.65)". (老者安之，朋友信之，少者怀之) Mencius said, " By treating the elders in one's own family as elders should be treated and extending this to the elders of other families, and by treating the young of one's own family as the young ought to be treated and extending this to the young of other people's families (Bloom, 2009, p.9)." (老吾老以及人之老，幼吾幼以及人之幼) When Zhou Yongkang was tried in the courtroom, he was already 73-year old. Normally, Chinese people in his age would be enjoying their retired life with families' companion. The

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[8] Zhou's given name is Yongkang. It means to live happily forever.

sharp contrast between the energetic black-haired Zhou and this vulnerable grey-haired Zhou, as well as the contrast between the image of this pathetical criminal and the ideal image of a calm and happy senior citizen, lead to people's sympathy toward him. Like other minor discourse frames initiated by the news, this frame disappeared almost entirely after June 12, 2015, only one day after the image of court trail was broadcasted.

To conclude, in this section, we described, interpreted and explained the two major frames of discourse and one minor frame concerning the Zhou Yongkang incident. In order to get a thorough and critical understanding of the discourse, the frames were put into the particular social, political, and historical context of China.

Chapter 5 Conclusion and Discussion

This chapter recaps the case study's main findings. It also discusses how these findings reflect and inform the nuanced characteristics of Chinese online public sphere and social media' role in facilitating public discussion, and attempts to address the research questions raised at the beginning of this thesis. In this chapter, we also present the significant and limitations of this study and suggest possible directions on this subject for subsequent research.

5.1 Major Findings

This study's primary purpose is to examine the public discussion about a particular political incident in social media environment as a means to unfold the process of constructing an online public sphere based on netizens' diverse perspectives. The academic inquiry about the Internet and social media's role in building cyber public spheres has brought about numerous publications. However, social media and its social and political implications in such a populous developing country with 710 million Internet users have not been thoroughly addressed due to the linguistic estrangement and the strong historical association of the new communication technology with democratic discourse. Furthermore, there is a lack of empirical research in this field. The number of studies that look directly into the social media content is still relatively small. Therefore, this study is an effort to fill this gap through an empirical case study to map out the distinct dynamics in China's online public sphere facilitated by Sina Weibo. Specifically, we took the online discussion in regard to the Zhou Yongkang incident as our case. We employed mixed research methods: quantitative content analysis and qualitative critical discourse analysis. Through these two approaches, we answered all the seven research questions and achieved the following findings.

Weibo users' expressed different attitudes toward the Zhou Yongkang incident; more people held negative opinion toward this case. Although netizens responded Zhou's case in diverse perspectives and tones, no statistically significant association was found between their responses toward this incident and the time periods. This finding is inconsistent with Xiang Zhou's (2009) study. In that paper, she analyzed the political blogs posted on the *Netease* website regarding the dismissal of Shanghai leader Chen Liangyu. The timeframe of her study was a two-month period from the day when the dismissal was released. She found that bloggers' attitudes changed over time. The inconsistency between this research and Zhou's research is probably due to the different timeframes used in the two studies. There was an eleven-month time gap the between two periods examined in this thesis. And each period was composed of only fifteen days. According to previous studies (Bondes, 2014; Hassid, 2013; Lu & Qiu, 2013), public discussion on Weibo of a hot topic will typically reach its peak point within one or two days and then the popularity will drop gradually unless another piece of news comes out attracting public attention again. The two time periods in this thesis were the peak times of the public discussion concerning Zhou's case, which was different from Zhou's research. Besides, the different features between microblogging and blogging may also contribute to the conflicting findings.

Our second set of research questions focused on Weibo users' opinions toward the government and other officials under the influence of Zhou's case. Through statistical analysis, we found that most of the posts that expressed opinion toward Zhou's case conveyed opinion toward the government and other officials, and the opinion was overall unfavorable. A statistically significant association was found between Weibo users' attitudes toward Zhou's case

and those toward the government and other officials. This finding is consistent with Zhou's research.

Based on the reflective feature of publics (Warner, 2002), we distinguished reposts from original posts and examined the relationship between reposts' opinion of the sources and the type of the sources. Only a moderate portion of users reposted and commented others' microblog indicating that the Chinese microbloggers had a strong tendency for self-expression. Microbloggers were not satisfactory toward their role as passive addressees, rather, they preferred to contribute their own voice to the public discussion. We figured out that governmental actors attracted more reposts than non-government actors. Moreover, the reposts attitudes toward the sources were found statistically significantly correlated with the type of the sources. This finding is consistent with Ip and Fu's article (2016), in which they also found that the type of source posts could influence the opinion of their reposts. When a microblogger reposts another one's post and provides his/ her own understanding, a conversation between these two people is formed. Even without direct dialogue, the action of repost expands the public of the original posts, enriching the diversity of the public discussion. On top of that, reposting microblogs can also be understood as a power-making process through which a message is disseminated and an idea is shared among Weibo users in a network. In this way, the reposts amplify and empower the voice of its source (Castell, 2009; Fu & Chau, 2014).

Through critical discourse analysis, we scrutinized the frames of discourse of the public discussion concerning this incident. We only looked into the posts that conveyed negative views of the Zhou Yongkang incident for two reasons. Firstly, the approach of critical discourse analysis aims to analyze the discourses that challenge prevailing assumptions (Fairclough, 2013; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). In the context of the Zhou Yongkang incident, the prevailing

assumption was that corruption among officials had become a parlous social problem in China, government's attempt to fight against corruption would receive support and compliment from citizens. The posts that conveyed negative attitude challenged this assumption. Additionally, the majority of previous empirical studies that investigated how netizens responded to the government's measures to solve social problems only employed content analysis, stating the frequency of negative opinions without looking into the discourse. Consequently, our research intends to describe, interpret and explain the frames of discourse among those negative views. In that process, we found two major frames of discourse and several minor ones. The major frames existed in both of the time periods, whereas the minor ones only had popularity in one single period and disappeared one or two days after the broadcast of the news. In the two major frames, netizens questioned and challenged the procedural justice and the legitimacy of the government's way of dealing with Zhou's case. They also expressed their negligent attitude toward this political event, saying that punishing a single corrupted senior official would not bring benefit to common people and there were other more significant social tensions waiting for the government to solve. We also discovered conversations between Weibo user who held opposite views. The existence of the conversations, direct or indirect, as well as the language used, demonstrated the critical-rational feature of the online public discussion (Habermas, 1989).

Back to the three hypothesis raised at the end of Chapter 1. We succeeded in rejecting the null hypotheses of Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3 by discovering statistically significant correlation between Weibo users' attitudes toward the Zhou Yongkang incident and their opinions toward the government and other officials, as well as that between reposts' attitudes toward the sources and the type of the sources. We nonetheless failed to reject the null hypothesis of Hypothesis 1 because of a lack of statistical evidence.

In general, the findings of this thesis paint a relatively promising picture of the social media as a platform for personal expression in public discussion on political issues, comparatively jumping out of the discourse agenda set by the government and state media. The online public sphere circling the Zhou Yongkang incident is diverse, reflective and critical-rational. However, without effective ways of civic political participation, the diverse online public opinions can hardly be transformed to social changes. During the two time periods examined in this thesis, according to the China Digital Times, "Zhou Yongkang" was listed as a sensitive word. This means that government and Sina's censoring practices had deleted posts that went too far before we collected the data. So it is still too early to affirmatively define social media's role in facilitating public discussion of politically sensitive issues and constructing a Chinese public sphere. Social media are still new in China. Changes in technological and social areas are happening day by day. On the one hand, new technologies keep popping up and existing ones are continually evolving. For instance, more and more people use smartphones to get access to Weibo (CNNIC, 2016). The technology of social media applications on smartphones makes censorship less effective. The apps can automatically download what the users have read, so even after the original content has been deleted from the server the content is still in users' smartphones. On the other, the capricious and often opaque nature of Chinese regulators censoring decisions has added unpredictability and complexity to the prospect of all currently accessible social media. In light of the above, it is difficult and almost impossible for researchers to predict social media's long-term impact on Chinese society.

5.2 Contributions and Limitations

This thesis makes three contributions to the academic inquiry of Chinese social media. First, the study brought together theories and research methods of communication, linguistics and political

science. It strived to discreetly examine and extrapolate the Anglophone concepts of the public sphere to Chinese context. Second, it sheds new light on investigating the instantaneous and diverse interactions happening on Chinese social media platforms. A massive currency of public discussion takes place on those platforms every day. Therefore, the platforms contain plenty of empirical data for scholars to analyze how daily communication on Sina Weibo has the potential to facilitate the constructing of a cyber public sphere in authoritarian China. This study adds a case study to the inquiry. Furthermore, it fills the gap in Chinese social media research methodology. This thesis represents the first time that Sina Weibo was empirically and systematically analyzed by means of both quantitative content analysis and qualitative critical discourse analysis. This study not only investigated the content of Weibo posts by the text but also analyze it within broader social, political and historical contexts.

This project also has several limitations. To begin with, Weibo was brought into market in fall 2009. It is a comparatively new thing in mainland China. Therefore, there are not much relevant literature for us to consult. Also, the Internet-related technology is still in a constantly evolving process. Technical innovations are emerging quickly in Sina Weibo. Consequently, relevant studies should be timely. However, our study can hardly fulfill this requirement due to the time and energy needed in the date collection and analysis. In addition, Social media research is still at an under-developed stage. Social media research has encountered severe methodological difficulties particularly with regard to the samples' representativeness in light of the vast amount of posts inhibiting social media spaces. This is particularly the case for Chinese social media research, where most effective computer-based tools applied in Internet research are far of limited use for the reasons of both language and technology (Bondes & Schucher, 2014). Although this thesis has tried its best to use computers to collect and analyze data, since the

meaning of Chinese language is quite complicated, and no data mining tools can effectively

process Chinese language, the research method still needs to be refined. Moreover, the thesis is

primarily based on one particular political incident, which may challenge the reliability of the

findings. The last, and maybe the most important, limitation of this study is to its sample. Since

the nature of the Zhou Yongkang incident is politically sensitive, some of the dissident posts had

already been censored before we built the dataset. As a result, Weibo users' "real" attitudes

toward this incident and the government should be more diverse than what the statistical results

may show. Unfortunately, this is a common problem for Chinese social media studies.

5.3 Suggestions for Future Research

I hope this thesis can serve as a starting point for other researchers to conduct more

comprehensive research and achieve a better understanding of social media's role in facilitating

public discussion and constructing a Chinese online public sphere. As mentioned earlier, there

are not enough empirical studies in this field. I hope the mixed methods employed in this thesis

can inspire more longitudinal case-based studies.

This thesis concentrates on one single political event, but there are an infinite number of

events happening every day. Future studies can take more apolitical events into consideration.

Also, when we discuss social media's role in forming a public sphere in China, the state-society

relation is a critical issue. Most of the existing research, including this thesis, focus on the

society's end. In the future, scholars can pay more attention to how the government responds and

utilize this new public sphere, like online deliberation and online consultation. Additionally, with

the development of new communication technologies, other emergent social media have received

more and more attention. Wechat has become the most widely used social media in China

(CNNIC, 2016). In contrast with Weibo, Wechat is more like Facebook, having more connection

with users' offline social network. The communication mode of Wechat is comparatively private and sometimes even anti-public. What is Wechat's role in constructing an online public sphere in China? The classical public sphere is based on citizens' common interest. However, today's cyber public sphere is dependent on interest and social network. Will this contrast make any difference?

Transferring the mixed methods used in this research to other studies would also offer a valuable opportunity to test the validity of the statements and findings presented here, identify the similarities and inconsistencies between the results. I hope, with more and more research being conducted scholars can work together to set a clear research framework for Chinese social media studies and address a better truth of contemporary China's public sphere.

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Appendix A: Coding Protocol

Introduction

This protocol addresses Sina Weibo users' discussion concerning the "Zhou Yongkang

Incident". It is divided into two sections. The first addresses Sina Weibo users' attitudes toward

this incident, and the second concerns those users' attitudes toward the Chinese government and

other officials under the influence of Zhou's trial. The content will be used to evaluate both the

nature of Sina Weibo users' public discussion with regard to Zhou's falling down and the extent

to which the public discussion on Weibo is different from the Communist Party's party-line.

Procedure and Post Eligibility for Study

Our study deals with Sina Weibo users' posts with respect to the "Zhou Yongkang Incident".

Special attention is paid to their attitudes. Therefore, a post may NOT be eligible for coding for

the following reasons:

1   The post is merely a news.
2   The post contains the key words that we used but does not really talk about Zhou's
    incident.
3   The post does not express any opinion or attitude toward this incident.

Please read the post before coding. If you believe a post is NOT eligible for the study because of

the three reasons listed above, go on to the next post. Consult with the primary researcher if the

post is ambiguous in its study eligibility.

Variable Operational Definitions

V1: Item number: (assigned)

V2: Item time period:

1= time period A (July 29, 2014 to August 13, 2014)

2= time period B (June 11, 2015 to June 25, 2015)

V3: Attitudes toward the dismissal of Zhou Yongkang.

1=favorable

2=neutral

3=unfavorable

Note we want to code users' attitudes toward Zhou's case, NOT toward the person.

V4: Attitudes toward the government or other officials

1=favorable

2=neutral

3=unfavorable

0=Not applicable (a given post does not mention or express the user's attitude toward the government or other officials)

V5: Nature of the post

1=original post

2=repost

V6: Type of source

1=governmental actors (government's official account, news institution, etc.)

2=non-government actors

V7: Repost's opinion toward the source

1=positive

2=negative

NOTE: the last two variables ONLY apply to the samples that are reposts. For those that are original posts, leave the two variables blank.

V1   Item Number

V2   Item date

V3   Item time period
1= time period A (July 29, 2014 to August 12, 2014)
2= time period B (June 11, 2015 to June 24, 2015)

V4   Attitudes toward Zhou's case
1=favorable
2=neutral
3=unfavorable

V5   Attitudes toward the government or other officials
1=favorable
2=neutral
3=unfavorable
0=Not applicable

V6   Nature of the post
1=original post
2=repost

V7   Type of source
1=governmental actors (government's official account, news institution, etc.)
2=non-government actors

V8   Repost's opinion toward the source
1=positive
2=negative

Appendix C: Quoted Posts (Chinese)

向兵律师：人民日报：周永康案早在 2013 年底已盖棺定论。如题所说，该案早已盖棺论定，那么后面的法庭审理就是为已经盖好的棺材挖一个坑。我不是质疑该案的正当性，而是质疑处理的合理性。法庭审理才是"盖棺"，也只有法庭才有资格盖棺论定，这是法治国家的应有之义。

樊素 Ivana：大幕终于拉开。我关心：为何此时公布？怎么定罪？仅以经济名义？庭审会公开否？航班延误与此有关？围观有何意义？从传言到发布一年多，主政者采用了怎样的舆论策略？为何？

木子老龙：我们很早之前就知道他落马，但我们知道上头不允许我们知道，所以我们都装作暂时不知道，等待上头什么时候一声领下"现在，你们可以知道了"，于是载歌载舞，欢庆大老虎的落马。在此以后，为保护我们不受伤害，我们该知道什么，不该知道什么，仍然要等待上头审批。这是个多么可爱的国家。

南极干粮：昨晚仔细看了周永康案件侦办纪实，突然觉得谣言地位空前权威，从去年出谣传至今周案发生，印证了谣言实则为"遥遥领先的语言"。😅 @官堂人家@嘉兴一乐@清风悠扬

施鹏鹏：不知道周永康案会不会公开审判，以响应四中全会"以法治国"的主旨？可第一个问题便是：全国政法系统的司法官员理论上全部都得回避，难道要组成专门的特别法庭？

明镜端方：大老虎不公开一审被判无期徒刑而不上诉，只能说明这只是一个 settlement，不过登报说明一下罢了。

FirCST: 康师傅这审得太没劲了...乖得跟猫一样...判词也真为难了... "受贿数额特别巨大" ~呀！""案发后主动要求亲属退赃"~哦~""滥用职权，犯罪情节特别严重"~吓~"故意泄露国家秘密，犯罪情节特别严重"~要完~"但未造成特别严重的后果" ~吁~

陨石老刀：#不平则鸣#据 6 月 12 日新闻报道：《周永康一审被判无期徒刑》评：犯这么大的罪，都能不死，只判个无期，在狱中再立立功什么的，减减刑，顶多十来年就出来了。或者设法弄个法外就医，干脆连"进"都不用进了。这样的反腐令人民失望，令贪官安心！

代言 14：周永康受贿一个多亿，泄露国家机密等只判无期！等于党政干部受贿一个多亿无死罪！法律还有威慑力吗？

沙迦的咒语：有人问，周永康贪了那么多钱，多少个亿了，为什么判了个无期，不枪毙？换了个小官，可能早就活不成了吧？这就是我们国家"人性化"的地方，政治是复杂

滴，法律也是有弹性滴，小官小吏，可以直接拖出去毙了，大一点的，要考虑他背后的利益集团以及裙带关系，要考虑某些老同志的感受，照顾他们的身体。

MrLeto：【凤凰新闻：男子目睹妻子遭强暴 拿菜刀砍死施暴者被判无期】看看他跟周永康谁先出狱（分享自@凤凰新闻客户端）

马锡聪：昨晚去修鞋，修鞋的大爷很健谈，我问他对周永康案的看法，大爷反问道：打掉这一群所谓的老虎能不能使房价、物价降下来？强拆死人能不能不发生？百姓能不能不再受恶吏的欺负？如果不能打虎的意义何在？

er-朵陈：不管周永康，还是徐才厚，就算把贪官都查光了，似乎也和我们平民百姓没半毛钱关系，我们要的不是查多少贪官，什么武器惊呆美国，吓傻欧盟等。要的只是能买得起房，看得起病读得起书，食物无毒，降低油价，空气无毒，需要的是一个好的公平制度社会监督，而不是永远幸福的生活在新闻联播里！同意的转发

嗨一起拯救地球吧：大老虎打掉了跟我有什么关系？物价会降低吗？房价会降低吗？视频会安全吗？政治上的失败者我不愿去落井下石，谁知道是不是一场排除异己的战争呢。

曾经的一个传说：这个神奇的国度还差这一个小笑话吗？一个大老虎倒下去了，值得欢呼雀跃吗？醒醒吧！税少了吗？权利多了吗？选票有了吗？社会地位改变了吗？能说真话了吗？什么都没变，产生贪腐的根基仍在，只要屎还在，就阻止不了蛆虫的前赴后继！

李根哥哥的围脖："大老虎"落马和我有一毛钱关系吗？很多人都在自媒体上这样发问。这样的提问并不愚蠢，只是麻木。最热衷于政治的中国人，在被切除参与政治的管道之后，对政治只剩下旁观议论与猜测。很多人都不再相信政治生活中最关键的呢些词汇比如正义和公正。他们只关心谁赢了，谁输了。这是猴子的哲学。

云南携手风之末端：反正啊，网络上就是喷口水的地方，不抓大老虎吧，有人说是没有反腐，抓了吧，又有人说这不是真的反腐，都说的很有道理，听听也就是了么。

鱼说还休：#周永康一审被判处无期徒刑#我没有看到一个意气风发的周书记。。。只看到一个风烛残年的老人。。。尽管你是一个罪犯，或者说曾经位极人臣的高管。。。

WHY是王海怡：#周永康一审被判处无期徒刑#感觉没多久，当初那个叱咤风云的周永康已是白发苍苍，看到那样的他，真的有点无奈。人这一辈子，到底图的是个什么【

福星vvv：#周永康一审被判处无期徒刑#永康不再永康。贪那么多有什么用？到头来一夜悔白头。站在原来分管的法院，今却成了阶下囚。人啊，不管位居如何，如果是为

了自己的私欲，遭报应是迟早的。道德是立人之本，法律则是底线，也是高压线！正应了那句话，正义可能会迟到，但永远不会缺席！