

**Political Communication Spaces in the Chinese Context:
A Case Study of the Chinese Media's Reporting of Sino-Japanese Relations**

**Submitted
by
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Abstract

This dissertation joins a vibrant conversation in the media and communication scholarship about the media-politics dynamics in contemporary Chinese context. As a part of a more general reconsideration of the current state of China's public communication, it addresses the questions of how has China's political communication space been embedded in and evolved with social contexts, and how have diverse media participants interactively engaged in the discussion of foreign affairs of Sino-Japanese relations. This thesis argues that China's political communication sphere is a 'vigorous but censored' space where the globally similar logic of networked connectedness coexists with the influences of the Chinese national contexts, and various media participants subjectively interconnect, interdepend, and inter-contextualize under networked but hierarchical structures. Through contextualizing the research model of the 'actor, connector and interlocutor' as well as conducting qualitative and quantitative analysis of media coverage and discussions on Sino-Japanese relations from China's official media and social networking site, this dissertation suggests that political communication arrangement in the Chinese context as a three-dimension process of information flow in which the Party organ takes the role of monopolistic 'actors' through providing original, authoritative news and information, setting key themes for other participants, and delimiting the boundary of communication space; the public serve as inclusive but heterogeneous 'connectors' who connect with each other through subjectively engaging in civic discussion and deliberating political viewpoints; and the political, media, cultural and social elites play the role of 'interlocutors' through becoming 'opinion leaders' which dialogically relates actor to connector dimensions and integrate China's political communication space by contextualizing, reinterpreting official's narratives and exerting influence on public opinions. This study rethinks the changing relationships between the party state, various media actors' representations of political issues, and individuals' everyday civic discussions and engagements in contemporary China.

Student Declaration

Doctor of Philosophy Declaration

“I, Tianru Guan, declare that the PhD thesis entitled, *Political Communication Space in the Chinese Context: A Case Study of the Chinese Media’s Reporting and Discussion of Sino-Japanese elations*, is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for academic journal publication. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature

Date 18/01/2019

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List of Abbreviations

BBC	the British Broadcasting Corporation
BBS	Bulletin Board Site
CATA	Computer-Aided Text Analysis
CCP	the Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CNN	Cable News Network
CNNIC	China Internet Network Information Center
ICT	Information Communication Technology
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
MENA	the Middle East and North Africa
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PRC	People's Republic of China
SNS	Social Networking Site
UNESCO	the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VAA	Voting Advice Application

Introduction

This thesis focuses on the field of political communication in the People's Republic of China (hereafter referred to as China). Because of its remarkable successes in national regeneration and its increasing international influences, China has attracted substantive academic interest from almost all the fields of social science. In media and communication circles, there has been a consensus that within the worldwide context of digitally networked connectedness brought by information communication technologies (ICTs), China's media ecology has been profoundly transformed in terms of news agencies' ownership and organizational structure, the way political information travels domestically and across the national boundary, and most importantly, the exploding and dramatically diversified communicative participants (e.g., Bandurski, 2014; Hadland, 2015; Lagerkvist, 2010, 2012; Shirk, 2011; Stockmann, 2013; Yang, 2009; Zhao, 2008, 2012).

This thesis is positioned herein as a part of a more general reconsideration of the current state of political communication in China. The central questions of this thesis are: *how has China's political communication space been embedded in and evolved with social contexts, and how have diverse media participants interactively engaged in the discussion of foreign affairs of Sino-Japanese relations?*

These questions arise out of this author's discontentment about the ongoing academic debate regarding the state of control/liberalization of the media in China. There has been a persistent 'authoritarian determinism' approach in current literature when researching political communication in contemporary China. 'Authoritarian determinism' approach refers to viewing China's communist political system, by which a fair multi-party election is absent, as the definitive premise when investigating media-politics relations in contemporary China; assuming that the authoritarian apparatus determines the fundamental logic and operational mechanism of China's communication sphere where multiple participants interact under a censored and hierarchical structure; and imagining that coercion and repression are the main bases upon which the regime rests since the Mao era. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the spread of electoral democracies throughout most of Central and Eastern Europe, the Cold War frame, which was used for interpreting and understanding 'self' and 'other', as well as 'friends' and 'enemies', had lost its intellectual coherence and narrative power (Norris et al., 2003). Nevertheless, the 'democracy/authoritarian' dichotomy, as the starting point as well as the end point, has been retained as a legacy of Cold War discourse when investigating

social reality and phenomena related to politics in the non-Western context, especially in China. Thus, although the old-style view that the Chinese media is nothing but the government's 'brainwashing apparatus' has been dismissed, an 'authoritarian determinism 2.0' that focuses on struggling relations between the repressive state and digitally armed, powerless groups has prevailed under the research framework of 'liberation and control' (e.g., Chen & Reese, 2015; Esarey & Xiao, 2011; Lee, 2016; Li et al., 2016; Luo, 2014).

Therefore, within the research radar of China's media-politics relations, emphasis has been given to the antagonistic relations between the authoritarian regime's pervasive surveillance and censorship in the communication sphere on the one hand, and resistance by commercial media who pursue journalistic independence, and a deliberative and digitally skilful public, on the other (e.g., Luo, 2014; Zhang & Lin, 2014; Zhou & Moy, 2007). To be more specific, since the 1980s, the large-scale marketization of the Chinese media industry was expected to have a liberating function, and some suggested that significant economic freedom would undermine strict government control and ultimately lead to political freedom (e.g., Li, 2000; Lynch, 1999). In the 2000's, it was argued that the emergence of increasingly low-cost digital technologies could also play a liberating role in China by empowering ordinary people to organize mass movements and thereby challenge the authority of the government (e.g., Fu & Chau, 2014; Huang & Yip, 2012). However, simultaneously, the Chinese state's subtle tactics of utilising media commercialisation and digitalisation to spread propaganda and tighten its social control has been recognized and explored by other researchers (e.g., Song & Chang, 2017; Tai, 2014; Wu, 2005; Zhou, 2017). Some of these researchers have drawn upon notions from the political sciences and developed new concepts to describe China's political communication reality, such as 'adaptive governance' (Heilmann & Perry, 2011), 'authoritarian resilience' (Nathan, 2003), 'networked authoritarianism' (MacKinnon, 2011), and 'responsive authoritarianism' (Hurst, 2016; Lee, 2018).

While the 'authoritarian determinism' approach and the 'liberation and control' framework have extensively explained some striking aspects of China's political communication landscape, such as the widespread discontent expressed on social media platforms and the confrontations between established and alternative information providers, they have also faced criticisms about provincial and Western-centric viewpoints (e.g., Waisbord & Mellado, 2014; Wang, 2010). They have been criticized of directly applying Western paradigms and arguments to public communication (e.g., democratic communication and mass deliberation)

to a largely different social setting and evaluating the successes/failures (or ‘emancipation’ or ‘nonfeasance’) of Chinese media development. More recently, some ‘de-Westernized’ efforts have been made to overcome the shortcomings of ‘Westernizing’ Chinese media studies and to provide an alternative research agenda, methodology and explanation. Some of these efforts include the rethinking of some conventional Western notions, categories and methodologies from the indigenous Chinese perspective, expanding the body of evidence in communication scholarship by considering Chinese local reality, as well as foregrounding theoretical frameworks original to China that are absent in media research in the U.S. or in Europe (e.g., Chen & Reese, 2015; Guo, 2017; Hassid & Repnikova, 2016; Yang, 2009; Zhao, 2008, 2012).

This thesis argues that China’s political communication sphere is a ‘vigorous but censored’ space where the globally similar logic of networked connectedness coexists with the influences of the Chinese national contexts, and various media participants subjectively interconnect, interdepend, and inter-contextualize under networked but hierarchical structures. Using contemporary China-Japan relations as a case study, this exploratory work aims to shed light on the general configurations of media-politics dynamics in contemporary China. Drawing on Volkmer’s (2014) model of the ‘actor, connector and interlocutor’, this thesis suggests that political communication in the Chinese context is a three-dimension process of information flow, in which official Chinese media take the role of monopolistic ‘actor’ through providing original, authoritative news and information, setting key themes for other participants, and delimiting the boundary of communication space; the Chinese public serve as inclusive but heterogeneous ‘connectors’ who connect with each other through subjectively engaging in civic discussion and deliberating political viewpoints; and the political, media, cultural and social elites play the role of ‘interlocutor’ through becoming ‘opinion leaders’ which dialogically relates the actor to the connector dimensions and integrates China’s political communication space by contextualizing and reinterpreting official’s narratives and exerting influence on public opinions.

This thesis is organised into eight chapters, including this Introduction. Chapters 1 and 2 review the literature on this topic and develop a theoretical framework of this thesis that seeks to construct a systematic, applicable model to describe the political communication process in China’s media sphere and the various participants’ interconnections. Chapter 3 explains the specific research method this thesis adopted. Chapters 4, 5 and 6, as the analysis chapters,

provide empirical evidence and explanations for the theoretical framework the thesis proposed by examining the discourse, practices, and roles of three different communicative dimensions in China's political communication sphere—the official discourses, civic discussions, and the political, social and media elites' engagements on political issues. The Conclusion chapter summarizes and captures the key findings of this thesis. Directions for future research on media-politics dynamics not only in China, but also in the wider global South contexts, are discussed in the concluding remarks.

This thesis examines the media-politics dynamic in digital spheres as well as in traditional mass media. It has been suggested that, due to the explosive development of new digital technology over the past decades, the dramatically reduced threshold and cost of public communication and civic participation might lead to a 'net delusion' (Morozov, 2011) in the academic fields of political science and communication. This 'net delusion' seems to have aggravated the 'authoritarian determinism' approach because it usually imagines that the online space offers a new and even playground for various communicative participants where established regulations, rules and power relations in the offline world are reset and reshuffled (or at least kept to a minimum degree), and, therefore, becomes a very promising space for grassroots resistance and upheaval. To critically test and reconsider the 'authoritarian determinism' approach and the 'net delusion', this thesis examines digital politics in the Chinese context. However, it by no means suggests that traditional mass media platforms, including the press, radio, and television have become irrelevant or insignificant in China's political communication ecology. Profound media convergence and hybridity (e.g., Jenkins, 2004; Chadwick, 2014) arose, as linear mass media organizations and outputs have become the most active actors in the digitally networked communication sphere, applying their rich information resource, high public credibility and wide outreach to become a key institution of 'sense-making' in regard to various political, economic and social issues.

The discussions in this thesis adds to the literature on China's contested media sphere with longitudinal empirical evidence on the contention, competition and struggle that exists in China's political communication space regarding the issue of Sino-Japanese relations. It also pays attention to other usually overlooked sides, such as the substantial social base for the current regime, which has voluntarily expressed pro-authority viewpoints from digital platforms; the official discourse on some specific political topics that might be found to be comprehensive and informative rather than pure 'propaganda', which is the label

automatically used by many studies; the way political news from the top-down has been accepted, negotiated, reconstructed and sometimes rejected by grassroots during networked information dissemination and reproduction; as well as the ‘intermediation’ process during which official narratives on political matters are further mediated and interpreted by a small group of ‘influentials’ and then diffused to broader audiences. This thesis aims to provide a holistic and comprehensive understanding of the political communication space in contemporary China, in which we can observe global influences (e.g., deliberative culture and its contrary, the de-politicisation trend) and local resilience (e.g., the Confucian ideology of respecting authority) dynamically interacting, a complex simultaneity of stable relationships (e.g., party organs enjoy the privilege of providing exclusive political news) as well as dramatic changes (e.g., some digital native media and individuals accumulate abundant discursive power and become opinion leaders in China’s online sphere), and the differentiation and polarisation among the perceived homogeneous ‘public’. Therefore, this thesis engages in, and enriches, the ‘de-Westernised’ efforts in communication scholarship by integrating globally observed phenomena and logic with China’s local observations—its distinctive political and social imprints and its recent development trajectories in the media sphere.

Adopting a case study approach, news reports and media discussions on the issue of Sino-Japanese relations were selected by this thesis because of the significance and openness of this topic in China’s political and media spheres. As two influential Asian powers, China and Japan have been significant to each other in terms of geopolitics, national security, economy and trade, and culture (Denemark & Chubb, 2016; Hollihan, 2014; Reilly, 2011). However, the long-term hostility and conflict between these two nations have created complex and vulnerable bilateral relations. The important but sensitive bilateral relations have attracted vast media attention as well as public discussions, which provided sufficient research data (including tremendous press coverage and online posts on this issue) for this thesis. Moreover, as a hotly debated topic of international affairs, Sino-Japanese relations have been largely open for public discussion and alternative viewpoints; this is in comparison to highly sensitive issues, such as Tibet or Tiananmen Square protests, which have scarce representation in China’s communication space. The Chinese government has been capable of blocking and deleting media coverage of a few sensitive issues at the expense of lifting restrictions on public engagement and discussion in most non-sensitive matters involving foreign relations, public policy, corruption, economics, government misbehaviour, and

livelihood (Tai, 2014; Wu, 2005). Therefore, the case selection of Sino-Japanese relations is considered as representative to shed light on the general transformations and trends in China's political communication sphere.

The specific research methods this thesis adopted are quantitative and qualitative content analyses. The application (or void) of a relevant theory/concept that could guide the sub-questions, as well as different sub-research tasks, have determined the methodology to be used in each case: namely, that of quantitative or qualitative design. More specifically, the 'actor' dimension of China's official media narratives concerning Sino-Japanese relations was analyzed in a quantitative fashion because this analytical section was informed by the concepts and discourse of 'geopolitical fear' and 'geoeconomic hope' (Cowen & Smith, 2009; Sparke, 2007). The main task of this analytical chapter (Chapter 4) is to test the Chinese media's representations of those two discourses when reporting on Japan and Sino-Japanese relations. By contrast, for the 'connector' dimension of public discussions about China's social media, a qualitative approach was selected because the content analysis of digital debates around the issue of Sino-Japanese relations aimed to discover emergent patterns, and also to develop a new concept that could better capture the changing nature and specific characteristic of mass deliberation in the Chinese context (related findings see Chapter 5). As for the 'interlocutor' dimension, the method of examining Sina's verified users' online practices involved a combination of quantitative analysis, which was used to code Sina users' profiles, while a qualitative approach was adopted to code their posts. Svensson's (2014) research has investigated the composition of Sina's verified users by randomly selecting 300 verified users to determine their occupations and institutions, and this provided a guideline and reference for this study to quantitatively test the users' profiles. In addition, to explore those verified users' discourses when discussing Sino-Japanese relations, a qualitative method was used to discover the emergent narrative patterns that 'digital influentials' displayed during the 're-mediation' process in China's political communication space.

This research collected and analysed Chinese language news coverage of Japan and Sino-Japanese relations from China's most comprehensive official media, the *People's Daily* between January 2001 and December 2015, as well as online posts on Japan from China's most important social networking site of Sina Weibo between September 2009 and December 2016. By using keyword research of 'Japan' and 'Sino-Japanese relations', all news articles from the *People's Daily* were collected and analysed. The specific data collection and coding

processes are explained in detail in Chapter 3.

The last but not least important thing it needed to be introduced here is the typology approach this thesis adopted. Through contextualizing Volkmer's (2014) model of the 'actor, connector and interlocutor', this thesis puts forward a set of three distinct models as its key conceptual apparatus for three reasons. First, establishing types and typologies makes it possible to associate China's cases with the worldwide general and systematic patterns of political communication spaces (Hallin & Mancini, 2017). While some research investigating political information flow has tended to provide path-dependent and idiosyncratic explanations for the characteristics and phenomena of those contexts, this thesis aims to identify patterns across multiple cases, and thereby conceptualize and explain them more systematically. Second, the typology approach offers a starting point to better understand and explain China's specific characteristics. Esser and Pfetsch aptly note, "every observation is without significance if it not compared with other observations" (2004, p. 5). Similarly, Sartori (1996, p. 245) claims that "he who knows only one country knows none". Although this thesis focuses its empirical examinations on China, bearing in mind the similarities and differences of various socio-political contexts has helped me avoid falling into the trap of 'methodological nationalism'. Thirdly and most importantly, the typology and contextualization employed in this thesis describe the empirical reality of interactions and power relations between diverse communicative participants that vary significantly between different cultures and systems, rather than denoting an ideal or normatively desirable model of political communication spheres which are based on the Western perspective of 'democratic communication'. The typology approach represents the 'de-Westernized' efforts this thesis tried to devote to. Many comparative analyses have imposed Western notions, such as mass deliberation and the public sphere, on research of the global South, comparing their presences and configurations in these societies with the Western world and evaluating the liberating potential of digital technology in emerging democracies, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian nations (e.g., Jackson & Wang, 2013; Harlow & Harp, 2012; He, 2014). Because these analyses often suppose that a free media environment, a high ICT penetration rate, in parallel with a politically-interested and information-armed mass public, will jointly represent the forward direction of political communication in non-Western nations, they tend to view the current configurations and features of political communication spaces in these contexts as a transitory phase. However, just as Volkmer's (2011) insights pointed out that hybrid regimes exhibit a surprising level of persistence, rather than simply being a transitory stage in a country's journey from autocratic

to democratic rule, this thesis contends that the political communication sphere in countries outside the affluent, democratic Western world will also be able to maintain their current operational mechanisms and internal logics for a considerable time and, therefore, it is worthwhile identifying their specific types.

This thesis starts in Chapters 1 and 2, by revisiting the paradigms, emerging questions, trends, and contested arguments on political communication scholarship in both global and Chinese context. Neither China nor the Chinese media are independent, isolated entities in the global communication space. A de-Westernised approach in China's communication research by no means suggests that the findings, debates and wisdom generated from the outside world are neglected, devalued or denied. A de-Western approach is inclusive rather than exclusive, and therefore, calls for a critical, cogitative engagement and reflection with the broader, internationally observed theoretical and empirical developments and trajectories in research on media and its social, political and cultural contexts. When examining the specialty of the Chinese media-politics dynamics, it must consider the global, macro-level online environment in which political information flows are no longer linear processes characterized by conflicts and compromises between politicians and journalists; rather, they unfold in a digitally, network-connected space in which a mass of communicative actors subjectively engage in reshuffling or reinforcing existing power relations by producing and disseminating political news, deliberating about public affairs, propagating the will of authorities, and mobilizing collective actions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Castells, 2011; Volkmer, 2014). Can the fundamentally homogeneous mechanism of network connectedness that has resulted from media digitalization and globalization also be observed in China? If so, then, how is the Chinese political communication space specifically configured and what are the inner logics and power relations among various participants who are strongly influenced by China's enduring social contexts? With these questions in mind, Chapter 1 reviews the literature on media-politics dynamics in digital spheres.

1 Literature Review: Media-Politics Relations in Digital Spheres

As the Spanish sociologist and communication scholar, Manuel Castells, argues, ‘in our society, politics is primarily media politics’ (2007, p. 240). From this point of view, although the media are not the holders of power, they enjoy crucial significance because they constitute the space where power is decided. This chapter reviews the literature on media-politics dynamics in the digital epoch. By doing so, this literature review maps the general landscape of political communication research, and locates the contribution of this thesis.

The role of media representation in shaping the perceptions and attitudes of their audience toward political and social issues is a paradigmatic issue that defines the field of political communication (Iyengar, 2017). The origins of research on the function of communication in society and politics can be traced to the 1920s, evolving from the early preoccupation with the ‘persuasion paradigm’ which posits that the mass public can easily be swayed by media discourse (e.g., message learning theory of Hovland et al., 1953), to a more ‘limited’ effect model that considers the media as gatekeepers that select issues for presentation. This ‘minimal effect’ approach was accepted and continually developed in the mid and late 20th century, with the development of conceptions of agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), media priming (Iyengar et al., 1982) and news framing (Entman, 1993).

In the mass media era, studies on media-politics relations have primarily focused on the struggle or cooperation between journalists and political authorities. The discussion on this topic has shown a division between the manufacturing consent paradigm which proposes that mass media’s reporting has a propaganda function by highlighting dominant views and marginalizing opposition voices (e.g. Bennett, 1990; Herman & Chomsky, 1988), and CNN effect theory which contends that the news media influence rather than are influenced by the government and push it to take action, in particular during humanitarian crises (Gilboa, 2005; Livingston & Eachus, 1995). In considering this dichotomy, Robinson (2000) has taken a middle-ground approach, developing the policy-media interaction model in which elite consensus and policy uncertainty are two significant factors that determine whether the media can be more or less influential.

However, because their research is located in a traditional mass media framework, the afore-mentioned theories on media-politics dynamics have been severely questioned and challenged by the rise of new digital media platforms, mobile phones, the Internet, social networks and various digital applications. The proliferation of new digital communication forms, in parallel with the diversification of media channels and the fragmentation of audiences has, by and large, changed traditional media-politics relations by extending political information sources for the public. This proliferation and diversification has empowered marginalized groups and ordinary people to have their voices heard, and enabled grassroots to organize collective actions and social movements in ways that have overcome the limits of time, space, identity and ideology (e.g. Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Coleman & Freelon, 2015). A large number of scholars from the political sciences, and media and communication domains have highlighted the unprecedented opportunities and challenges brought by digital media that have affected politics, and have investigated the new dynamics between the political authority and the media (e.g., Bimber & Davis, 2003; Castells, 2007, 2011; Chadwick, 2014; Dahlberg, 2015; Delli Carpini, 2000; Morozov, 2013; Prior, 2013; Vaccari, 2015; Valenzuela et al., 2012; Van Dijck, 2013; Volkmer, 2014).

This chapter is organized as follows. It starts by examining studies that have conceptualized political communication research in digital spheres. Section 1.1 first introduces the academic dichotomy between ‘digital optimism’ views that applaud the empowering effects of digital communication on civic engagement; and ‘digital pessimism’ perspectives that lament minority groups’ advantageous adoption of ICTs—which has further sharpened the existing power gap. Section 1.2 then reviews the literature that has contextualized media-politics relations. Different research emphases are found when examining political communication arrangements in Western-established democratic contexts. These of which, have mainly focused on the role of digital initiatives in facilitating the public’s formal and conventional political participation, as well as in the global South, which has shed more light on exploring new media’s functions in some radical and insurgent political actions. At last, Section 1.3 narrows down the research scope to China, and reviews the current literature on China’s media-politics dynamics as well as introducing three reductionist approaches dominant in current China-focused political communication studies.

1.1 Conceptualizing the Politics-Media Interplay Across Societies

A consensus in the literature has been reached that information and communication technologies (ICTs) have fundamentally changed the mass media landscape as well as interpersonal communication. However, whether the media-politics dynamics in a democratic setting have been changed correspondingly has remained uncertain. As some features of digital communication are seemingly ‘participatory’ by nature, such as the many-to-many model and the low threshold and cost to engage, a positive correlation between digital communication and a better, healthier and more robust democracy has been taken for granted (Morozov, 2013). However, meta-analyses conducted by Boudianne (2009, 2015) of studies in the fields of political science, communication, sociology, and computer sciences that investigated the civic function of the Internet (Boudianne, 2009) and social media (Boudianne, 2015) demonstrated that both were less likely to have a significant, causal, and transformative effect on political participation. An enigmatic prospect of the politics-media interplay in the digital sphere has stirred up scholarly interest, rather than extinguished it. The increasingly conceptual innovations of digital politics have reflected this academic enthusiasm, which have shown a dichotomy between ‘digital optimism’ viewpoints that applaud the significant mediated and empowering effects of digital communication on civic engagement, and ‘digital pessimism’ perspectives that lament minority groups’ advantageous adoption of ICTs has further sharpened the existing power gap (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Bimber, 2017; Chadwick, 2014; Dahlgren, 2005; Morozov, 2011; Prior, 2007; Volkmer, 2014).

While this study situates itself within the research field of political communication; however, the field itself is very interdisciplinary, and includes scholarship from media and communication, political science, sociology, and political and social psychology. This chapter takes an interdisciplinary perspective, integrating a series of studies that address the political consequences of digital communication from different research fields, with a focus on the dichotomous aspects in the current literature. The reason for focusing on the scholarly dichotomy around this issue is because investigations of media-politics dynamics usually stress the power relations between various media actors, opposing arguments about “winners” or “losers” on the battlefield of new information and communication take a central place in extant political communication studies and stir up further debates from both sides.

However, it is necessary to note in the text that these opposing viewpoints sometimes come from different fields and sometimes analyze events at different levels, (for example, the social

movements mentioned in 1.1.2 are group-level events, 1.1.3 discusses the formation of global public sphere and is more about society in general, and 1.1.5 sheds light on selective individual-level exposure). Though these analyses are at different levels, they all concern the key questions of Chapter 1—that is, whether the new, digital media can facilitate public discussion and civic participation and form a cross-boundary public sphere that can refine democracy in democratic nations and democratize authoritarian regimes. Section 1.1 discusses these conceptual initiatives from both the ‘empowering’ approach of digital optimism, and the ‘normalizing’ perspective of digital pessimism.

1.1.1 Digital, Deliberative Democracy: Cultivating Pluralism and Rationality

In the discussion on digital media’s democratic potential, the conception of deliberation has been often aired. Largely derived from Habermas’ (1989) notion of public sphere, the idea of deliberation emphasizes the vital role of civic discussion in a healthy, robust democracy through inclusive, informed and negotiated political decision-making (Bohman, 1996, 1997; Elster, 1998; Fishkin, 1991). By integrating the political science and communication perspectives, the specific notion of deliberative democracy has been variously defined as ‘a process of reaching reasoned agreement among free and equal citizens’ (Bohman, 1997, p. 321), as ‘the procedures of open discussion aimed at achieving rationally motivated consensus’ (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 156), and as ‘communication that induces reflection on preferences and perspectives in non-coercive fashion’ (Dryzek, 2000, p. 6). Despite these slightly differing definitions, deliberative democracy has been generally characterized as ‘active and voluntary engagement’, ‘rational’, and ‘a nonviolent competition between diverse opinions’.

With the dramatic development of ICTs, several scholars and advocates of deliberative democracy have focused their research attention on the Internet and social media platforms. These supporters envision ‘cyberspace’ as a new, democratic public sphere, in which peer-to-peer exchanges and many-to-many forums enable large numbers of citizens to deliberate on a broad range of public issues. These citizens are able to express their informed, thoughtful views in ways that reflect and influence public opinion, as well as urge—if not compel—cooperation by political decision makers. There is a growing theoretical and empirical literature that has addressed the role and mechanism of digital communication in diversifying political information, cultivating people’s tolerance for opposite viewpoints, and facilitating pluralist opinions, which have all contributed to the formation of effective, rational civic debate and democracy (e.g., Albrecht, 2006; Coleman, 2004; Dahlgren, 2005;

Helpern & Gibbs, 2013; Medaglia & Yang, 2017; Wright & Street, 2007).

Despite significantly cultivating pluralism and rationality among the public, digitally enhanced mass deliberation has not been a mechanism exclusively practiced by the grassroots. It has benefited and been adopted by diverse social members, including political authorities. Governments in many countries have realized the participatory feature of digital communication, using a series of new media initiatives, such as text-based chat rooms, online forums, Twitter, and online consensus conferences, to engage the public in deliberation (Delborne et al., 2011; Meijer & Thaens, 2013; Moss & Coleman, 2014). Experience has illustrated that the most successful online discussion forums are usually those that are clearly structured around particular issues, are well moderated and facilitated, and which are clearly linked to policy formation and decision-making (Ferguson, 2008; Wright, 2006). The increasing adoption of social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook by governments' and political leaders' has also opened a window for micro-publics to assemble around specific topics and engage with them in depth (Chadwick, 2009; Mossberger et al., 2013). Consensus conference, which was developed first in Denmark and creates a framework for policymakers to include and qualify people's attitudes and opinions on emerging issues of science and technology, has been introduced to other parts of the world by adding the digital component and, therefore, has realized 'virtual deliberation' (Delborne et al., 2011). In addition to influencing the policy-making process of nation states, it has been argued that mass online deliberation has also played an increasingly important role in the daily operations of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Berny, 2013).

While the notion of online deliberation has gained popularity, and has been applauded for having a democratic potential by cultivating an informed public, some studies have investigated its rational biases and viewed the perspective of digital, deliberative democracy as being associated with emotion and affect (Dahlgren, 2009; Grabe & Myrick, 2016; Martin, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015). It has been claimed that some forms of political participation are driven by emotional engagement and not just rational thought (Grabe & Myrick, 2016). In particular, group-based emotions (especially anger) have been shown to be among the most powerful predictors of collective action on political issues (e.g. van Zomeren et al., 2008).

1.1.2 Mobilizing the Public Online: From ‘Collective’ to ‘Connective’ Actions

Mass mobilization refers to ‘the creation of broad social networks of people around a shared interest in blocking or promoting social change’ (Lim & Kann, 2008, p. 79). It has been argued that the digital media environment offers new opportunities to critical, ‘outsider’ and resource-poor interest groups and ordinary citizens to organize and implement collective activities, promote a sense of community and collective identity, and establish connections with other social movements (e.g., Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, 2013; Bimber, 2017; Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Langman, 2005). The digital media-fuelled social movement, which has been defined as ‘cyberactivism’ (McCaughey & Ayers, 2013), has changed the landscape of collective action, and its political consequences have attracted considerable scholarly inquiry.

Fruitful studies have empirically examined the way that citizens use digital media to mobilize during political events, such as in the 1996 US election (Bimber, 1998), in the 2015 British general elections (Dutceac Segesten & Bossetta, 2017), with the anti-Iraq war demonstration in the US (Bennett et al., 2008), in Spain’s Indignados Movement (Anduiza et al., 2014), and Occupy Wall Street (Theocharis et al., 2015). During these events, the specifically mobilized functions of digital media were in-text calls for action, hashtag commands, the sharing of calls for mobilization, and frequent postings (Dutceac Segesten & Bossetta, 2017). Furthermore, several main themes of digital mobilization have been identified as anti-war, against economic inequality worldwide, and calls for democratization. For example, Volkmer (2014) demonstrated that through social media, Israeli and Iranian citizens were able to engage with each other and promote an international, discursive campaign on Facebook for peaceful reconciliation of the political conflict between the two countries. This initiated an anti-war campaign by Israeli and Iranian citizens that was also supported by individuals in the USA and Europe. In addition to the anti-war theme, the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) protest in Seattle marked the beginning of the global justice cyber movement (Juris, 2012), and new communication technologies became the vehicle that brought together the tens of thousands of protesters who confronted WTO delegates (Lievrouw, 2011). The Occupy Wall Street Movement was a digital mobilization landmark that targeted economic inequality worldwide that set off a global chain reaction (Theocharis et al., 2015). In societies where democracy has not been fully achieved or guaranteed, a digitally connected public has increasingly used the Internet and social media

to mobilize and call for democratization, such as Taiwan's Sunflower Movement (Yang & Kang, 2016) and Hong Kong's Umbrella Revolution (Lee & Chan, 2016).

Apart from the empirical examination of mass mobilization, a substantial conceptual innovation on this issue has been the notion of 'connective action' developed by Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 2013). By examining the organizational differences that are embedded in digitally enhanced mass actions, Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 2013) distinguished two forms of mass mobilization involving 'collective action' and 'connective action'. While the logic of collective action is associated with high levels of organizational resources and the formation of collective identities, the logic of connective action is based on personalized content that is shared across media networks. They contended that digital communication did not significantly change the core dynamics of collective action but functioned as a new platform or tool to communicate and organize. They argued that, on the contrary, digital technology has transformed the core dynamics or mechanism of connective action, because it has connected previously separated individuals through a networked structure (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, 2013). They used several recent cases of digitally enhanced mass protests to illustrate the differences between collective and connective actions. According to their typology, mass actions that were sponsored by established organizations (governments or NGOs) were classified as collective actions, such as the large, anti-capitalist protests in London from the *Put People First* (PPF) campaign in 2009. In this case, digital communication was used to attract broader public engagement and to help citizens spread the word over their personal networks. Other types of mass action, such as the 15-M Movement in Spain and the Occupy Wall Street protests in the United States, were categorized as connective actions because there was no established organization that operated or supported them and technology platforms and applications took the role of established political organizations. In this mode, political demands and grievances are often shared in very personalized accounts that travel over social networking platforms, e-mail lists, and online coordinating platforms (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

Generally, the concept of deliberation focuses more on rationality and cognition (Moss & Coleman, 2014), while the notion of mobilization sheds more light on emotional reflection (Papacharissi, 2015). As two interconnected civic functions of digital communication, online deliberation and mobilization have been considered complementary rather than opposites. In

addition, through comparative study, Lim and Kann (2008) demonstrated that digital deliberation and mobilization could affect politics in different social contexts. Public deliberation could succeed when citizens partner with government officials in the service of good decisions, political legitimacy, and social stability. Thus, it can potentially deepen relatively stable democracy. In contrast, mass online mobilization can succeed when activists disrupt and disable non-democratic political entities. Therefore, democratic mobilization can promote democracy where it does not prevail. Lim and Kann (2008) also put forward the idea of ‘part-time activism’ (p. 100). Since off-line activism has always required great self-sacrifice and a substantial time commitment, a price too high for most people, the new, digital communication has opened the door to ‘part-time deliberation’ and ‘part-time mobilization’.

1.1.3 The Formation of Global Public Sphere

By recognizing the empowering role of digital communication in deliberating and mobilizing the public, investigations of digital politics have crossed the ‘bounded’, territorial and sovereign boundaries, and have examined the role and function of digital communication in the emergence of the transnational and global public sphere (e.g., Cammaerts & Audenhove, 2005; De Zúñiga, 2015; Fraser, 2007; Volkmer, 2014).

According to Curran (1994), the transnational public sphere can be understood as an open space where conflicting discourses about transnational issues are developed and debated. Traditionally, concepts of public sphere and citizenship have been developed and discussed under the Westphalian nation state framework (Marshall, 1950; O’ Connor, 1973). However, over the past several decades, the increased globalization of the world economy, transport, and mobility, in parallel with the rise of new actors with whom states have to share power at the international level of governance, have dramatically broken the ‘boundedness’ of citizenship and expanded the public sphere to transnational, regional even global domains (Volkmer, 2014).

The revolutionary innovations in information and communication have been viewed as playing a crucial, enabling role in the formation of the global public sphere, through three forms, namely, global diasporic networks (Diminescu & Loveluck, 2014; Sahoo & De Kruijf, 2016), global civil societies (Cammaerts & Audenhove, 2005), and global social movements (Sobré-Denton, 2016; Volkmer, 2014). Increased migration flow has been a significant

driving force of transnationalization and globalization, and migrants' adoption of digital communication to communicate with their homelands has contributed to the emergence of the global diasporic sphere. Recently, the robustness of global diasporic communication has brought scholarly reconsideration of the definition and criteria of citizenship (Hintz et al., 2017). Cheney-Lippold's (2016) research illustrated that in the US an individual can be designated a foreigner despite having a US passport if surveillance data shows that he or she communicates a lot with people from abroad. He referred to this communication-based designation as 'jus algoritmi' and contrasted it with classic citizenship definitions based on family and birth location (Cheney-Lippold, 2016).

The concepts of global civil society and global social movement are closely intertwined, playing irreplaceable roles in the formation of the global public sphere through the use of the Internet, Twitter and other social media applications to foster cross-national interactive engagement (Cammaerts and Audenhove, 2005; Sobré-Denton, 2016; Volkmer, 2014; Wolfson, 2013). For instance, LabourStart is a portal site for labour-related news and the international labour movement, and is supported by an independent organization, the Labour and Society International. Based in the UK but globally organized, the case of LabourStart shows that the Internet allows for widespread, global activity with little or no resources. This user-friendly tool for uploading articles and links resulted in a low threshold for correspondents to update local and international labour news (Cammaerts & Audenhove, 2005). Another case is Indymedia, which is a worldwide network of independent media organizations with between 100,000 and 150,000 volunteers (Wolfson, 2013). Indymedia is largely a virtual platform bringing together both individuals (activists) and organizations. In using digital technologies, it provides an alternative and organic global public sphere where global civic actions are organized.

The aforementioned literature has conceptualized media-politics relations in the new media era, suggested a cheerful prospect of digital communication's facilitatory function of promoting healthy democracy through mass deliberation and online mobilization as well as the creation of a globally interdependent public sphere. However, this optimistic approach is only one side of the coin. Others have suggested that these are idealistic expectations that have often led to disappointment. This 'digital pessimism' perspective has held a 'normalization' approach, suggesting that none of the forms of information diversification, media decentralization and new ways of content dissemination fundamentally change the

systemic logic of elite-driven political communication, which is largely replicated online. Their studies have illustrated that new, digital communications have reinforced existing power hierarchies by exacerbating three types of confrontation that involve the state-public contradiction (through ubiquitous online surveillance, e.g., Graham & Wood, 2003; Lyon, 2001; Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2017), inter-party conflict (by intensifying political polarization, e.g., Iyengar et al., 2012; Stround, 2010; Sustain, 2002), and the gap between the ‘digital haves’ and the ‘digital have-nots’ (and between the ‘political interest haves’ and the ‘political interest have-nots’, e.g., Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Prior, 2007).

1.1.4 Ubiquitous Mass Surveillance: Enduring State-Public Contradiction

This section discusses the first viewpoint: the ubiquitous mass surveillance exacerbates the state-public contradiction. The previously powerless public is by no means the only beneficiary of the digitalization of information and communication. Politically and economically resource-rich groups have been dedicated to maintaining their control and influence in the online sphere through the advantageous use of digital media, such as exercising mass surveillance. People’s online activities leave data traces, including browsing histories and geo-location information that can be collected, monitored and analysed by corporations and states. This is the specific meaning of surveillance (Cohen, 2010; Hintz et al., 2017). Big Internet companies have collected, stored and analysed data for targeted advertisement making, and closely cooperated with national governments and provided bulk personal data to states. As Ansorge (2016) noted, ‘the sovereign hungers for data. Authority demands information-generating processes to understand the social order and act on it’ (p. 2). Although datafication is by no means the first instance of the state using information processing to expand its influence over citizens (Mattelart, 2003), it provides vastly enhanced possibilities to understand, predict, and control citizen activities.

Studies have suggested that a new, ubiquitous but invisible power dynamic is emerging, which one side of the dynamic refers to as the digital citizen who provides personal data and the other side means the state and large Internet companies that own, trade and control the data (for instance, Hintz et al., 2017; Russell & Waisbord, 2017; Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2017). Investigations of this power gap have developed concepts of a ‘surveillance society’ (Lyon, 2001), ‘sousveillance’ (Mann et al., 2002), and ‘surveillance realism’ (Dencik & Cable, 2017). Their results have illustrated that mass surveillance has significantly weakened digital citizenship because it can create a ‘chilling effect’ in which people come to self-police and

self-regulate their online communication to avoid controversial political discussion (Dencik & Cable, 2017; Reitman, 2014).

Although mass online surveillance has existed for a long time, most people were not aware of it until the Snowden revelations in June 2013 (Bakir, 2015). Considered at the time to be the biggest intelligence leak of all time, documents revealed by Edward Snowden gave details of secret surveillance programs carried out by a number of Western democracies, most notably the NSA's PRISM and the British Government Communications Headquarters' (GCHQ) Tempora (Hintz et al., 2017; Wood & Wright, 2015). The Snowden revelations illustrated the ubiquitous surveillance and seamless collaboration between Internet giants and national governments. It also generated public debate over mass surveillance operated by states, which has resulted in calls for policy changes, legal reforms and court proceedings. Some studies have investigated the national surveillance policy transformation brought by the Snowden revelations, and have found that no fixed outcome has been achieved (Hintz & Brown, 2017; Treguer, 2015; Wizner, 2015). While formal policy reform in some countries has extended the legal use of surveillance capabilities (for instance in France and Denmark, Treguer, 2015), in other nations people have witnessed a pushback on state powers and the restriction of data collection by state agencies (for example, the USA Freedom Act, Wizner, 2015).

When investigating the media and public reactions to the revelations of mass surveillance, a 'normalizing' approach was found to be widely adopted (Dencik & Cable, 2017; Wahl-Jorgensen et al, 2017). Wahl-Jorgensen, Bennett and Taylor's (2017) analysis showed that the U.S. newspaper's coverage tried to normalize state surveillance by highlighting concerns over national security, focusing on the surveillance of elites, and minimizing the attention given to the mass surveillance of citizens. Dencik and Cable (2017) developed the concept of 'surveillance realism' to describe the public attitude toward surveillance operated by the state. This concept refers to the public's simultaneous unease and concern with widespread data collection alongside active normalization and justification of surveillance practices that come to limit the possibilities for imagining alternative ways of organizing society. They suggested that the lack of transparency, knowledge, and control over what happens to personal data online has led to feelings of widespread resignation rather than consent to the status quo of mass surveillance. Dencik and Cable (2017) also contended that it is necessary to consider Snowden's leaks, mass surveillance and public reaction to this issue in the context of increasingly security-oriented state conduct in a perceived threat

environment. The 9/11 attack and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's (ISIS) proliferation have cultivated a sense of insecurity and threat in the public's mind, which has provided the justification for state-conducted mass surveillance.

It has been argued that mass surveillance undermines the democratic and empowering potential of digital media by creating the 'chilling effect' (Greenwald, 2014; Reitman, 2014). Because of the widespread resignation to mass surveillance, people tend to strengthen self-policing and self-regulation of their online activities to avoid controversial or sensitive political issues (Reitman, 2014). Similarly, Greenwald (2014) claimed mass surveillance kills dissent in their minds, where the individual trains him- or herself to think only in line with what is expected and demanded. In general, mass surveillance reflects the enduring, ubiquitous conflict between governments and the public. While state-conducted censorship in authoritarian regimes is easy to detect and often incurs condemnation, surveillance exists globally, including in democracies, and is very difficult to perceive.

1.1.5 Selective Exposure and Polarization: Intensifying Inter-Party Contradiction

In addition to exacerbating state-public conflicts through government-conducted mass surveillance, the new media environment has also been considered capable of aggravating inter-party contradictions due to its potential effect of selective exposure and polarization. Deliberation studies usually view digital media as virtual venues for pluralistic and rational communication, whereas scholars researching selective exposure and political polarization have demonstrated a rather balkanized and polarized form of public discussion on digital communication platforms (Chan & Lee, 2014; Lelkes et al., 2017; Prior, 2013; Stroud, 2010; Sunstein, 2002). Generally, the concept of polarization may be seen as a situation in which a group or population may be divided into separate 'clusters', and there is (a) high within-cluster similarity alongside (b) high between-cluster dissimilarity (Esteban & Ray, 1994). Political polarization, therefore, could be understood as the division of individuals (mass-level), or parties (elite-level), into distant ideological camps positioned at the extremes, while the central position is voided (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008).

The media, as the primary way in which opinions on political issues have been disseminated linearly (in the mass media era) or in a networked way (in the digital epoch), and their role in the formation and intensification of polarization have been widely explored. The concept of selective media exposure, referring to an individual's tendency to favour information that

reinforces their pre-existing views and filters out any contradictory content (Stroud, 2010), has been proposed as an antecedent as well as a consequence of political polarization. Several decades ago, when mainstream media outlets offered a more homogeneous and neutral ‘point-counterpoint’ perspective on most political issues, consuming news was a collective experience (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Therefore, from the perspective of selective media exposure, audiences’ selections were relatively few in the mass media era. However, this balanced but ‘selection-deficiency’ media environment has dramatically changed with the advent of the digital epoch. The Internet, and social media in particular, have been viewed as capable of motivating selective exposure and political polarization because of their features of information explosiveness, viewpoint diversification, and subjectively chosen logic. This makes it far easier for individuals to obtain cognitively consistent content and avoid dissonant information.

Many empirical studies have examined the digitally enhanced, polarizing effect on the public’s perception in a variety of established and emerging democracies (e.g. Gruzd & Roy, 2014; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Karlsen et al., 2017; Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016; Trilling et al., 2016). More synoptically, relying on representative surveys in ten countries: Canada, Colombia, Greece, India, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States, the results from Yang and his colleagues’ research (2016) demonstrated that there was a systematic and consistent association between digital media use and perceived political polarization. Furthermore, a few conceptual innovations have been developed to represent the consequences of this digitally enhanced, political polarization. For instance, Brainard (2009) proposed ‘cyberbalkanization’ as a term to refer to an online phenomenon in which ‘people seek out only like-minded others and thereby close themselves off from ideological opposition, alternative understandings, and uncomfortable discussions’ (p. 598). Sunstein’s (2002) concept of ‘echo chamber’ dynamics presents the idea that people discuss with like-minded people and are therefore exposed to supporting arguments that confirm and reinforce their existing opinions. Praiser’s (2011) concept of ‘filter bubble’ suggests that the algorithmic personalization of digital platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook’s news feeds, might further promote exposure to biased information, because less preferred information is algorithmically eliminated.

While many scholars have devoted themselves to discussing how the newer media channels could contribute to more polarized public opinion in this ever-evolving era, investigations into

the inner motivation of mass polarization remain inertial, with a traditional focus on partisanship (Müller et al., 2017). Because the concept of polarization implies connotations of ‘incompatibility’ and ‘dichotomy’, research on political polarization has usually been conducted under specific ideological oppositions. However, over the past few decades, the incentive of political polarization at the mass level has been automatically and exclusively simplified as ‘partisanship’, emphasizing party differences on a left/right (or conservative/liberal) axis. Fiorina and colleagues (2005) have even suggested that there is no popular polarization, but simply partisan polarization.

A number of studies have examined the polarizing effect of selective media exposure on intensifying inter-party hostility and incompatibility (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Iyengar et al., 2012; Yang et al., 2016). For instance, Pfau and his colleagues’ (2007) findings uncovered significant evidence of differential media use among Republicans and Democrats, highlighting the fact that republicans gravitated to talk radio, radio news, and television advertising, whereas Democrats avoided talk radio and tuned in to television news (Pfau et al., 2007). Iyengar and Hahn (2009) demonstrated that conservative Republicans in the US tended to read news from the online websites of Fox News and avoid news from CNN, while liberal Democrats exhibited the opposite preferences. Lelkes, Sood, and Iyengar (2017) also found that access to broadband Internet could increase partisan hostility. While some studies demonstrate an explicit, causal relationship between digital-enhanced polarization and partisan viewpoints, a few scholars suggest that this causality is conditional and lacks generality. For instance, Prior’s findings (2013) illustrated that one-sided news exposure may be largely confined to a small, but highly involved and influential, segment of the population. However, there is no firm evidence that partisan media are making ordinary Americans more partisan.

1.1.6 The Digital and Political-Interest Gap: Mobilizing the ‘Mobilized’

In addition to mass surveillance and political polarization, the unbalanced access and adoption of digital media by various social groups has been viewed as the third barrier, undermining the civil function of digital communication by exacerbating the gap between the ‘digital haves’ and the ‘digital have-nots’, and between the ‘political interest haves’ and the ‘political interest have-nots’ (Min, 2010; Norris, 2001; Prior, 2007; Warschauer, 2004). With the dramatically increasing penetration of the Internet and mobile phone use

worldwide, the research of digital divides has turned from examining the superficially uneven access to digital technology to exploring the different degrees of political interest and investigating their influence on the democratic potential of digital communication (Min, 2010; Nam, 2011; Nam & Stromer-Galley, 2012). In general, the approach of the digital divide (including the political interest divide) has suggested that the civic function of ICTs has been largely overstated because new, digital communication is just mobilizing the ‘mobilized’, and ‘the old challenge of bringing politics to those who are not interested in it still remains’ (Ruusuvirta, 2010, p. 63).

As Castells (2002) has put it, the ‘exclusion from (online) networks is one of the most damaging forms of exclusion in our economy and in our culture’ (p. 3). Although the provision of resources was found to alter absolute levels of provision (more people gained Internet access), it was less successful in altering relative levels of provision (for the already advantaged also moved ahead, gaining faster broadband and mobile access). Concern over the gap between the digital ‘haves and have-nots’ can be conceived at all levels of analysis: at the global level (Chen & Wellman, 2004; Çilan et al., 2009) where economic and political barriers have distinguished the digital infrastructure of developed and developing countries; at the national level (Haight et al., 2014) where such factors as geography, socio-economic status and ethnicity have proved crucial; and at the household or domestic level, where gender and age (or generation) have stratified access and use (Van Volkom et al., 2014). Studies have noted that the continuing ‘digital divide’ has threatened to exacerbate existing offline differences in political participation (Curran & Witschge, 2009; Shirazi et al., 2010). For instance, Curran and Witschge’s (2010) study found that pre-existing political elite networks were more likely to use the Internet to further the exchange and debate between each other than with the previously excluded public.

While some literature on the digital divide has focused on the access dimension, other studies have shed light on the usage dimension by investigating the association between individuals’ political interests and their adoption of digital media to participate in civic affairs, and have developed the concepts of the ‘second-level digital divide’ (Min, 2010), the ‘democratic divide’ (Nam, 2011; Norris, 2001), and the ‘participation divide’ (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008). Their results demonstrated that because in the digital sphere people can subjectively choose some content in which they are interested and avoid other content, there is a growing

knowledge gap between individuals who are interested in politics and those who are not. Prior (2007) influentially argued that in the US, the development of a high-choice media environment has driven many citizens away from the news because they prefer to spend their time being entertained. Simultaneously, news ‘junkies’ now have access to many more sources of political information. In a similar study, Strömbäck and Shehata (2010) examined news consumption among Swedish citizens between 1986 and 2010 and discovered the same growing gap between ‘news-seekers’ and ‘news avoiders’. They concluded that political interest has been a crucial factor in examining digital media’s democratic function.

In general, Section 1.1 reviews the opposite two approaches about media-politics dynamics in the digital epoch. The ‘digital optimism’ viewpoint has applauded the empowering function of digital communication from three aspects of cultivating pluralism and a deliberating public (Coleman, 2013; Delli Carpini et al., 2000), effectively mobilizing collective and connective actions (e.g., Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Bimber, 2017), as well as facilitating the formation of the transnational public sphere (Fraser, 2007; Volkmer, 2014). On the contrary, the ‘digital pessimism’ perspectives have held a ‘normalization’ approach, suggesting that new, digital communications reinforce the existing power hierarchies by exacerbating three types of confrontation, involving the state-public contradiction (through ubiquitous online surveillance, e.g., Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2017), inter-party conflict (through intensifying political polarization, e.g., Stround, 2010), and the gap between the ‘digital haves’ and the ‘digital have-nots’ (or ‘political interest haves’ and ‘political interest have-nots’, e.g., Prior, 2007). The dichotomy between ‘digital optimism’ and ‘digital pessimism’ represents one of the fiercest debates in current media-politics relations literature, and has shown a profound presence in China-focused political communication studies as well. The subsequent section (Section 1.3) will introduce how the perspective of ‘liberation and control’, which is the manifestation of this dichotomy, prevails in the discussion of media-politics dynamics in contemporary China. However, before narrowing down the research scope to China, it is necessary to note that in addition to the continual debate over ‘digital optimism’ and ‘digital pessimism’, some studies have provided empirical investigations that have underscored the influence of social contexts on the dynamics of media-politics.

1.2 Contextualizing Digital Politics in Diverse Societies

This section introduces the literature that emphasizes the contextualization of political communication research in diverse social settings. Rather than considering that digital

communication can lead to a homogeneous consequence by promoting democracy or strengthening existing power relations in different societies, some scholars have suggested that any communication technologies are embedded in and evolve within social contexts (Couldry, 2015; Rimal et al., 2015; Van Dijck, 2013). Therefore, the current online ecosystem is located in a larger sociocultural and politico-economic context where it is inevitably molded by geography and historical circumstances. Section 1.2.1 suggests that, in Western democracies where culture and civic engagement practices were internalized before the era of the Internet and social media, literature on the dynamic between the media and politics in these societies has mainly focused on the role of digital media initiatives in facilitating the public's formal and conventional political participation, such as in presidential campaigns, voting, and petitions (e.g., Hall, 2015; Wright, 2015). However, results from studies that have researched the opportunities and challenges brought by digital communication to the Global South where democracy has had less of a social foundation, such as Asia, the Middle East, Africa and South America have suggested that the digital media initiative has played a more significant role in facilitating some radical and insurgent political actions, including demonstrations, protests and riots (Section 1.2.2). Some examples include an examination of the role of digital media in the 2014 Sunflower Movement in Taiwan (Yang & Kang, 2016), the 2014 Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong (Lee & Chan, 2016), Mexico's YoSoy 132 Movement (García & Treré, 2014), Free Zone9 Bloggers campaign in Ethiopia (Gagliardone & Pohjonen, 2016), and in the more well-known Arab Spring (Hänska Ahy, 2016; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013).

1.2.1 Facilitating Conventional Political Engagement in Western Democracies

It is argued that for most Western nations, the democratic system has had more than a 200-year history of the public electing representatives to form a government (Schumpeter, 2010). Because the multiparty election system is the most prominent pillar of the formal architecture of democracy (Levitsky & Way, 2010), much of the existing research on digital media-politics relations in Western societies has been campaign- and voting-focused, investigating the way new communication and information technologies have helped voting and other formal political engagement to be convenient and easy and, therefore, facilitate a healthier democracy (Bouillianne, 2015). Three of the most striking new media-related developments in the last decade have been the widespread use of online voting systems, digital voting applications, and E-petitions, which have attracted scholars' attention and debate (Hall, 2015; Hirzalla & Zoonen, 2015; Louwerse & Rosema, 2014; Rosema et al.,

2014; Wright, 2015).

1.2.1.1 The Electronic Voting System: Boosting Voter Turnout or Security Vulnerability?

Electronic voting allows voters to cast their ballot using an internet-based system, which makes it convenient for voters to cast their ballots at home, thereby saving time and the cost of transport to travel to a polling station. The proponents of the electronic voting system believe that it has great potential to increase voter turnout by making voting more accessible and easier for certain marginal groups, such as the disabled, military personnel and citizens living overseas (Alvarez et al., 2009; Hall, 2015; Solop, 2001). However, opponents have strongly suspected it is not politically neutral and has serious security loopholes (Halderman, 2016; Ryan & Grewal, 2014). They have suggested that the online voting system is not as secure as conventional voting and allows corrupt politicians and clever hackers to easily manipulate election results (Hall, 2015).

Although the security and accuracy of online voting remain in debate, it has gained worldwide popularity. In some countries the online voting system remains in a trial phase, including Australia, Canada, Norway, the United Kingdom and the United States (Goodman & Smith, 2016; Hall, 2015), but has become a standard platform for voting in other nations, such as Estonia and Switzerland. Estonia is the only country in the world where all voters can vote online in national elections, and in the most recent (2015) election, 31% of the voters did so. Therefore, it has become a focus of online voting research. A few studies have explored the politics and sociology of online voting in Estonia, and their results have underscored the influence of the Estonian social context on its embracement (Alvarez et al., 2009; Heiberg & Willemson, 2014). Despite being a small and relatively poor country, Estonia has traditionally given a high priority to science and technology innovation. Estonian computer scientists have developed innovative products for Western markets, such as the file-sharing program, Kazaa, and the teleconferencing system, Skype. The Estonian government has also actively used the Internet in its own work. In cooperation with the Open Society Institute and the United Nations Development Programs, it established an e-Governance Academy in 2002 that develops online solutions for Estonia and exports them to other countries (Lust, 2015). Therefore, research has shown that in a context in which information technology has traditionally enjoyed high respect in Estonia, online voting has seemed a natural extension of electronic government in this country (Alvarez et al., 2009; Heiberg & Willemson, 2014; Lust, 2015).

1.2.1.2 *The Voting Advice Application (VAAs): Picking Your Party Online*

While online voting has remained on a trial basis in much of the world, voting advice applications (VAAs) have been widely adopted in most democracies for more than a decade. Voting advice applications (VAAs) refer to the interactive Internet platforms that operate short questionnaires to gauge users' policy preferences, which are subsequently compared with the policy preferences of political parties or candidates (Katakis et al., 2014). Based on these comparisons, VAAs provide advice to users about the political parties that supposedly come closest to their policy preferences (Triga et al., 2012b). The specific value of VAAs is the reduction in time and effort that voters need to become informed about the views of political parties. VAAs assist voters with acquiring information about the policy views of competing parties by systematically comparing their own policy views with those of the political parties, and by deciding how these comparisons translate into a rank-order of parties that meet their own policy preferences (Hirzalla & Zoonen, 2015).

In most European countries and in the US as well as Australia, one or more VAAs have become available for the public (for instance *Smartvote* in Switzerland, *Wahl-O-Mat* in Germany, and *Isidewith* in Australia), and increasing numbers of citizens have made use of them (Rosema et al., 2014). Some studies have suggested that using VAAs stimulates electoral participation and increases voter turnout, especially mobilizing groups of citizens that otherwise would have voted in lower numbers (Vassil, 2011). However, there has been no agreement in the research about the extent to which VAAs have influenced people's voting decisions. Political knowledge and interest have seemed to form two of the indicators that can affect the preparedness of voters to follow the advice given by VAAs. More politically knowledgeable and interested voters have seemed to be less inclined to change their vote due to VAA use (Dumont & Kies, 2012; Kleinnijenhuis & Van Hoof, 2008). The extent to which voters have 'swung' has seemed to be another indicator of their voting decisions. Volatile voters may be more prone to follow the advice of VAAs (Ladner et al., 2012; Ruusuvirta & Rosema, 2009). More specifically, voters may be less inclined to change a pre-existing voting preference due to the advice they receive from a VAA when it strongly differs from this preference (Wall et al., 2014).

1.2.1.3 E-Petitions: the Debate about whether the Government Listens

As the online voting system and voting advice applications come into play mainly during government elections, E-petitions operate in the day-to-day lives of the public. Some have considered the E-petition to be one of the most successful E-democracy tools ever, at least quantitatively in terms of citizen uptake (Chadwick, 2012), and in its capacity to enhance representative democracy and empower individuals (Bochel, 2013). A famous example is the Downing Street E-petition in the UK, which has been viewed as one of the most widely used, government-led E-democracy tools in the world. In 2015, it accepted over 33,000 petitions that received 12.4 million signatures with Downing Street making 3,258 official replies (Wright, 2016). It has been argued that E-petitions play an important role in setting public agendas and starting new debates (Bershanskaya et al., 2013).

However, other studies have suspected that the government does not listen to such grassroots voices, and have contended that the E-petition's role of facilitating participatory democracy has been very limited for three reasons (Lindner & Riehm, 2011; Wright, 2015). First, participation has been unequal, and ultimately the silent majority has been far larger than the more vocal minority of people who have signed any single petition. Second, E-petitions could lead to reactionary, lowest common denominator policy-making where tough policy choices are avoided or dropped because of 'mob rule' (Wright, 2015). Third, E-petitions are controlled, or at least sponsored by states, and, therefore, can become a political football amongst politicians.

1.2.2 Politics and Digitally Enhanced Mass Actions in Non-Western Regions

While the literature on Western societies has continued to debate whether new digital communication innovations are capable of consummating a voting system and other conventional political engagement, and therefore, whether they enhance democracy, the remarkable development of ICTs in the Global South has attracted research attention as well (e.g., Gagliardone, 2016; Lee, 2017; Mutsvairo & Sirks, 2015; Valenzuela et al., 2012). It seems that the way digital media has engaged in politics in the Global South has differed considerably, functioning as the creator of a new space for ordinary people to express their voice and communicate more radically with governments. However, the trajectory, features and impact of digital communication are strongly affected by various social contexts in different countries and regions in the global South.

Since the early 2000s, with the rapid development of telecommunication infrastructure and the penetration of mobile phones and other digital devices in Asia, Latin America and Africa, many studies have investigated the avenues that the increasing access to ICTs has offered to people to speak up and coordinate, and therefore, change the traditional media-politics relations in these regions (e.g., Chen & Reese, 2015; Chibita, 2016; Gagliardone, 2016; Chua & Wellman, 2015; Gagliardone et al., 2012; Lee, 2017; Lim, 2012; Lotan et al., 2011; Mutsvairo & Sirks, 2015; Shaw & Luo, 2016; Valenzuela et al., 2016). Their findings have suggested that because the absence of normative civic culture and well-established democratic systems in most nations of the Global South, large populations have suddenly been able to practice public debate with the advent of digital communication technologies, which in turn may have affected political decision-making and democratization (Valenzuela et al., 2016; Wu, 2012). Simultaneously, the political and social contexts of lacking a conventional, constitution-endowed and institution-guaranteed mechanism of political engagement have shaped the digitally negotiated civil disobedience protests in these regions as usually angry, event-focused, and short-lived (Mutsvairo & Harris, 2016). Studies have also demonstrated that diverse social contexts, as well as geographic and historical backgrounds, political systems, and cultural traditions, should be all taken into account when analysing the role of digital communication in various regions and societies, such as the political feature of ‘hybrid governance’ in Sub-Sahara Africa (Gagliardone & Pohjonen, 2016), the tradition of ‘contentious politics’ in Latin America (Tarrow, 2011), the Confucian ideology in East Asia (Bockover, 2003), as well as the conflict-laden characteristics of Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (Fraihat, 2016). Therefore, studies that focus on those national and regional contexts provide alternative research agenda, methodology and explanation on the issue of political communication arrangement in digital spheres. However, before the discussion it needs to note that this regional approach is for the convenience of highlighting region and cultural contexts, not simplifying regional differences.

1.2.2.1 ‘Hybrid Governance’ in Sub-Sahara Africa and the Tremendous Development of ICTs
Although a meta-analysis suggested that Africa-focused research has examined newspaper content more than other media types (Wasike, 2017), the democratic and developmental potential of digital communication applications has been gradually realized by scholars over the past decade (Chibita, 2016; Gagliardone, 2016; Gumede, 2016; Mutsvairo & Sirks, 2015; Tazanu & Frei, 2017). Horizontally, Africa remains the least developed region in terms of ICT adoption, as the latest statistics from the Internet World Stats (2016) show that in 2016,

Internet penetration in Africa was relatively low at 28.7% while the world average was 50.1%. However, considering that its penetration was only 2.7% in 2005 (Internet World Stats, 2005), it is fair to claim that there has been tremendous development of ICTs in Africa in the last ten years.

In spite of recognizing that the high cost of connectivity, infrastructure bottlenecks, a low level of basic and technological literacy, and state censorship have all posed important obstacles for the majority of Africans in accessing the Internet and other digital platforms, many empirical studies have examined the way ordinary African people adopt new communication technologies to call for a more responsible and transparent government and to interact with the outside world (Gagliardone & Pohjonen, 2016; Ibrahim, 2017; Mutsvairo & Harris, 2016). For instance, Gagliardone and Pohjonen (2016) used the Free Zone9 Bloggers campaign as a case study, exploring the emergence of digital activism in Ethiopia. The Zone9 Bloggers are a blogging group from Ethiopia who aim to exploit the power of social networking platforms to initiate conversations with those in power. Although they did not consider the rulers as enemies and usually proposed dialogue with the government, the Ethiopian government viewed them as a political threat and arrested six members of the Zone9 bloggers and charged them as terrorists. The arrest stirred a high-profile, international social media campaign to free the arrested bloggers, which spread online behind the #FreeZone9Bloggers hashtag. After over 500 days in prison without charge, the Zone9 bloggers were finally acquitted of the terrorism charges. The #FreeZone9Bloggers campaign was applauded as an unprecedented event in the history of digital activism in Ethiopia because of its volume, persistence and international visibility. Some other examples that have also reflected the empowering potential of digital communications include the Occupy Nigeria Protest in 2012 (Ibrahim, 2017), the 20 July 2011 protest in Malawi (Mutsvairo & Harris, 2016), and the 10 September 2010 Food Riots in Mozambique (Mare, 2014).

In contrast, other cases have illustrated that in Africa's political contexts where authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes control nations, the rulers have a monopoly of power to set the public agenda, even in the digital communication epoch (e.g., Chibita, 2016; Gumede, 2016; Shaw & Luo, 2016). Because telecommunication infrastructures are usually controlled by governments or state-owned enterprises in this region, most African governments have regularly shut down social media during periods of political upheaval, such as in Ethiopia (Gumede, 2016), Sudan (Spencer, 2016), and Uganda (O'Neill, 2016). Moreover, a few

regimes have imported cyberspace censorship equipment from China to maintain their control over the digital space, such as Zimbabwe and Ethiopia (Gumede, 2016). Chibita (2016) used three case studies to investigate the trajectory of digital activism in Uganda. Through shutting down or disrupting digital activists' websites, the Ugandan government successfully controlled the online space and dismissed the public who adopted digital communication to disseminate information and mobilize protests, which maintained the state's dominant power in the digital sphere. Shaw and Luo (2016) analyzed Facebook and Twitter discussions on the sacking of Sierra Leone's Vice President, Sam Sumana. Their findings showed that very little had changed in the power relations between the elite and grassroots sources in defining and producing the news in the online environment, especially during significant political events.

Furthermore, a few studies have stressed that when researching digital communication and its political influences in Africa, focusing on public-state relations is not comprehensive because a crucial, distinctive political characteristic of many African countries is 'hybridity' (Boege et al., 2009; Gagliardone, 2016). For most societies in Sub-Saharan Africa, different political actors have coexisted and cooperated in the same socio-political space, including governments and religious, cultural and family institutions, which has been viewed as 'political hybridity' (Boege et al., 2009). Therefore, digital media innovations have operated not only as an avenue where ordinary citizens communicate with the government or regimes exercise censorship to suppress the public, but also as a platform where various unconventional actors compete to increase their social and political presence, including NGOs, clan leaders, and even rebels (Gagliardone, 2016).

1.2.2.2 The Tradition of 'Contentious Politics' in Latin America's Media Spheres

Latin America has shown a different regional picture on the issue of new media's political consequences than the African context. A newly established democratic system, a rapidly expanding Internet and social media applications, and deep political and socioeconomic inequalities in parallel with a long tradition of 'contentious politics' have co-configured Latin America's media-politics dynamics in this digital epoch (Breuer & Welp, 2014; Groshek & Bachmann, 2014; Scherman et al., 2015; Treré, 2015; Valenzuela et al., 2012; Venegas, 2010).

After multiple and widespread experiences with authoritarian and military regimes in the 20th century, democratic government and the rule of law has more recently become an enduring

feature in almost all countries in Latin America, with leaders elected by popular vote and strengthening democratic institutions, while Cuba has been the most notable exception. Since Latin America generally has become politically stable in recent decades, the region has experienced severe social problems, including an exacerbation of the inequality of income, poverty and unemployment, especially among younger people. Latin America has one of the highest rates of income inequality in the world, and poverty and unemployment among young people are twice, and even three times the overall global rate (Groshek & Bachmann, 2014). In addition, Latin America has a long tradition of ‘continuous politics’ (McAdam et al., 1996), traceable to colonial times. Collective protests in Latin America are deeply rooted in the political process, and social movements provide an alternative channel to voice citizen demands and influence the public debate. The Latin American region has also developed into one of the world’s fastest growing social networking markets over the past 10 years, and is dominated by Facebook.com (Breuer & Welp, 2014). Since social networking enhanced by ICTs has empowered the youth generation in this region, some studies have explored whether online activist campaigns are capable of influencing government policies, inciting significant political or social change, or even provoking a ‘Latin Spring’ as the social media did in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 2011 (Groshek & Bachmann, 2014).

Research has usually focused on the ICT use by individual and collective civic society actors in this region, and has analysed a range of bottom-up-driven initiatives aimed at reinforcing participatory democracy in Latin America (Burch & León, 2014; Harlow, 2014; Hoffmann, 2014; Treré, 2015). For instance, Breuer and Groshek (2014) analyzed the Brazilian Clean Record (*Ficha Limpa*) campaign against electoral corruption, which was primarily promoted through social media channels. The *Ficha Limpa* campaign was proposed by the Movement Against Electoral Corruption, a Brazilian NGO that coordinates 50 civil society groups. By going online to attract public attention and seek petitions, the MECC successfully achieved a maximum level of mobilization, receiving about 1.3 million signatures and submitting them to the National Congress. In 2012 the *Ficha Limpa* bill obtained constitutional status and was the fourth bill proposed directly by the people’s initiative to become law in Brazil. Treré (2015) investigated the role of social media, such as Twitter and Facebook in Mexico’s YoSoy 132 Movement. He suggested that the new communication technologies were used and appropriated in order to democratize mainstream media, foster pluralism and trigger important processes related to political culture within the Mexican context.

Generally, research findings have shown that the Latin American social movements have been increasingly successful in using the Internet and social media networking to press for greater civil society participation in the governance of their countries, as well as in increasing the public's influence on the outcome of international negotiations on issues such as free trade or the environment (Breuer & Welp, 2014; León & Burch, 2014). However, those who have expected a 'Latin Spring' brought about by social media may be disappointed because, to date, there has been no example in which new media-facilitated protests or uprisings have overthrown the rulers or made significant political change in Latin America. Groshek and Bachmann (2014) provided an explanation of this absence of significant political change by considering Latin America's different social context from the MENA region. They suggested that the majority of Latin American countries have sustained democratic regimes for the last two decades, which has been quite different from countries in MENA where autocratic governments ruled the nations. In spite of newly established democratic systems in Latin America, this region shares some social problems, including corruption, income inequality and a high unemployment rate. Therefore, the demands that citizens in the Latin American region want to make of their governments through adopting digital communication technologies are more likely to call for a more transparent election system and government than for radically overturning regimes (Groshek & Bachmann, 2014).

1.2.2.3 The Conflict-Laden Characteristics of Media-Politics Dynamics in the MENA Context

The third context this chapter reviews is the Middle Eastern and North African region (MENA). This region once captured a lot of attention and imagination from scholars researching digital media and politics because of the crucial mobilizing role played by social media and the Internet during the 'Arab Spring'.

The Arab Spring refers to a revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests, riots, and civil wars in the Arab World that began in December 2010 in Tunisia and spread throughout the countries of the Arab League and their surrounding nations. Many analyses of digital media and the Arab uprisings have emphasized the capacities of digital media, thereby focusing on the nature of networks, the speed of information flow, and the issues of information control and their relevance for facilitating political action in the Arab uprisings (e.g., Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Lim, 2012; Lotan et al., 2011; Tufecki & Wilson, 2012; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013). For instance, Eltantawy and Wiest (2011) demonstrated that social media played an instrumental role in the success of the Egyptian revolution by engaging activists in online

discussions and debates on sociopolitical conditions since 2009, building and strengthening ties among activists, and increasing interaction between protesters and the rest of the world, which ultimately led to the resignation of the Egyptian ruler Hosni Mubarak. Similarly, Breuer and his colleague (2015) examined the popular protests in Tunisia between 2010 and 2011. Drawing on resource mobilization theory, the authors suggested that social media and the Internet provided the basis for intergroup collaboration that facilitated a large ‘cycle of protest’ to develop, and overcame the collective action problem by reporting event magnitudes that raised the perception of success for potential free riders, and led to an additional element of ‘emotional mobilization’ by depicting the worst atrocities associated with the regime’s response to the protests. Sumiala and Korpiola (2017) gave special emphasis to the digital solidarity facilitated by the mediating Muslim martyrdom. They suggested that the mediating martyrdom in and via social media played a significant symbolic role in articulating the shared feeling of anger and frustration surrounding injustice, torture, and humiliation by the ruling elite, thereby fuelling imagination of solidarity and subsequent political events in Tunisia and Egypt (Sumiala & Korpiola, 2017).

However, more than five years past, the hype of the ‘Tweet revolution’ and ‘Facebook revolution’ has proved to be gloomy. The overturning of dictators in the Arab uprisings did not bring people living in this region a promising democratization and stability, but led to highly divided, chaotic, and conflict-laden societies (Falk, 2016). As Fraihat suggested ‘polarization in this region has escalated to new levels, with various groups even justifying the use the violence, as the cases of Libya, Yemen, and Egypt have shown’ (2016, p. 2). Under this context, the fanatical expectation about the digital communication’s democratic potential in MENA region has gradually faded away (Gayo-Avello, 2017).

1.2.2.4 Digital Communication and Asian Philosophy

Asia is becoming the fast-growing digital media market in the world with both of its economically developed and developing members enthusiastically embracing the new information and communication technologies. According to the ICT Development Index (2016), nations and regions in East Asia occupied three of the top 10 most ICT-developed countries (South Korea, Hong Kong and Japan were ranked first, sixth and tenth, respectively). Furthermore, Southeast Asia is remarkable for being a region where people take part far more in online social networking sites than the worldwide average penetration of these services (Abbott, 2015). Facebook has maintained its dominance in cyberspace across

the countries, with more than 80% of Internet users in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines having an active profile on Facebook (Lee, 2017; Nielsen, 2011). Asia's huge online population and market potential have contributed to the dramatic growth of Internet-related products and services with profound technological leapfrogging, which has generated trend-setting innovations in social networking sites, online games, and E-commerce (Lim & Soriano, 2016; Sullivan, 2014). As a result, digital communications have significantly penetrated into Asian societies, and transformed the dynamics and power relations in media-politics (Lee & Chan, 2016).

However, the political consequences of digital communication in Asia have been strongly affected by this region's unique philosophy and political traditions, marked by Confucianism, statism, and developmentalism that have hindered the development of active citizenship (Bockover, 2003; Lee, 2017). For many political leaders in the region, political participation in unconventional forms has often been considered unnecessary or even harmful to the maintenance of effective and accountable governance. In such non-democracies, rather, institutionalized forms of political participation have often been manipulated to give legitimacy to the state (Chang et al., 2013). The region is also home to some of the world's oldest and most advanced civilizations, with lasting legacies of artistic, cultural, and scientific innovation of widespread influence. Asian philosophical traditions, such as from India, China, Japan, Buddhism and Islam have also stood the test of time, serving as the foundational principles of governance, education, social interaction, and enterprise. Therefore, the transformations in Asia's increasingly digitized, socio-technological landscape have been as much shaping as shaped by these enduring cultural and philosophical traditions (Lim & Soriano, 2016).

Considering Asia's vigorous digital market and huge online population, and its unfamiliarity with civic debate and public participation, the results of studies that have focused on how digital communication mobilize civil society in Asia have tended to concur that the diffusion and adoption of new information and communication technologies in Asia have been positively associated with non-traditional political engagement such as riots and protests, but not with traditional, institutionalized participation (Gainous et al., 2015; Lee, 2017). Some recent political protests in Asia, including the 2014 Sunflower Movement in Taiwan (Yang & Kang, 2016), the 2014 Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong (Lee & Chan, 2016), and the

anti-PX demonstration in China (Chin-Fu, 2013) all highlighted the role of the Internet, social media and smartphones as devices that helped connect and mobilize individuals.

Generally, Section 1.2 reviewed the different research emphases when examining political communication arrangements in Western, established democratic contexts, and in the global South. For the former context, current studies have mainly focused on the role of digital initiatives in facilitating the public's formal and conventional political participation, such as in presidential campaigns, voting, and petitions (e.g., Hall, 2015; Hirzalla & Zoonen, 2015; Wright, 2015). For the later one, extant literature has shed more light on exploring new media's functions in some radical and insurgent political actions, including demonstrations, protests and riots (e.g., Gagliardone & Pohjonen, 2016; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013). From political, social and cultural perspectives, China belongs to the global South context. Studies on China-focused political communication have also shown some conflictive features under the 'liberation and control' framework. Section 1.3 narrows down the research scope to China, reviewing the current literature on its media-politics dynamics as well as introducing three reductionist approaches dominant in current research on this topic.

1.3 Political Communication in the Chinese Context: From the 'Propaganda Apparatus' Perspective towards the Model of 'Liberalization and Control'

Political communication in China was incontrovertibly a tool of the Communist Party's propaganda in Mao's era (1949-1976) (Hassid, 2008; Lagerkvist, 2010). This view has been supported by the Chinese media's description of itself as a 'mouthpiece' of the state (Scotton & Hachten, 2010). The development of the propaganda function of the Chinese media has historical and socio-political origins that can be traced to the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). From the birth of the Xinhua News Agency in the 1940s during the Second Sino-Japanese War, Party journalism and the media were used as effective instruments for promulgating the Party's ideology and mobilizing public support (Zhao, 1998). After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the then president, Mao Zedong, suggested that journalism and the media should be completely controlled by the Communist Party by providing a top-down flow of communication (Lee, 2000; Zhao, 1998). In the first three decades of Communist China, the news media system represented the quintessential 'Leninist transmission belt' (Shambaugh, 2007) for indoctrination and mass mobilization, especially during political and social campaigns such as the Anti-Rightist Movement, the

Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution (Chu, 1994; Gold, 1985; Zhao, 2012).

However, over the past three decades, the propaganda methods developed during the Mao era have changed because of overwhelming trends of commercialization, globalization, and the dramatic development of information technologies in the field of media and communication. The Chinese media have been swept up in these changes and have experienced considerable transformations in terms of ownership, organizational structure, profit models, and integration into the global media system (e.g., Hadland & Zhang, 2012; Huang & Lu, 2017). Scholars have recognized these new phenomena concerning the changing media ecology in China and have investigated whether such developments are capable of promoting significant political and social transition (Creemers, 2017; Jiang, 2014; Hassid, 2008; Li et al., 2016; Luo, 2014; Yang, 2003, 2009, 2016; Zhao, 2012). Current discussions on media-politics relations in the Chinese context have widely adopted a ‘liberalization and control’ model, examining the liberating function and democratic potential of market-oriented media and digital technologies, on the one hand, and the Chinese State’s resilience to the ever-changing media environment, on the other. Two scholarly dichotomies have emerged in regard to these questions: (1) the competition between the Party organs’ dominant position and the commercial media’s challenging power, and (2) the struggle between mass media and digital media in setting the public agenda.

1.3.1 Dichotomy 1: The Competition between the Party Organs’ Dominant Position and the Commercial Media’s Challenging Power

The first dichotomy within the framework of ‘liberalization and control’ is the power relations between China’s official Party organs and the market-oriented media agencies. The essence of this debate is about the extent to which significant economic freedom would undermine strict government control and, ultimately, lead to political freedom in China. Since the early 1980s, the commercialization of the Chinese media has progressed by trial and error through the three stages of ‘marketization’, ‘conglomeration’, and ‘capitalization’ to become an important force of investigative journalism and alternative information (Cai, 2015; Gang & Bandurski, 2011; Hadland & Zhang, 2012; Scotton & Hachten, 2010). Nevertheless, the Party-State has not held back in its efforts to maintain control over the progress of media reform and has dealt proactively with unintended consequences, bestowing the exclusive right of reporting significant political issues to the official Party organs (Hadland, 2015; Zhang, 2011; Zhao, 2012).

Under the Reform and Open-Up policy, most industrial sectors in China's economy, including the media, experienced a prevailing trend of commercialization in the early 1980s. To unburden itself of the huge fiscal appropriation, the central government decided to commercialize the Chinese media market (Chu, 1994). In the following decades, except for several significant Party organs such as Xinhua News Agency and the *People's Daily*, the Chinese government gradually cut back the main subsidies provided to media operators and left them open to market mechanisms (Zhao, 1998). During the 1990s, after the state loosened its control over the media industry and permitted operators to sell advertising time and space, the Chinese media landscape experienced significant transformations with the majority of the official media becoming more entertainment-oriented to cater for their audiences. Furthermore, the commercial media's main motivation and activities became profit-focused, and they ceased to simply propagate the State's ideology and policies (Hadland, 2015; Shirk, 2011). The trend of media commercialization accelerated during the 2000s with the emergence of media conglomerates such as the Southern Media Group. In addition to market mechanisms, government's support was another important reason for media conglomeration. The Chinese government has been viewed as actively promoting media conglomerations insofar as it has sought to strengthen the Chinese media agencies' ability to withstand competition from their international counterparts. Moreover, it is argued that the Chinese government believes it is easier to oversee a small number of large media operators than a large number of small agencies (Hadland & Zhang, 2012; Gang & Bandurski, 2011).

Contrary to the news workers within the Party organ who have been viewed as 'civil servants' rather than authentic journalists, Chinese commercial media have been characterized in terms of American-style press independence and professionalism and, therefore, have gained higher credibility (Stockmann, 2010, 2013). As a result, some scholars have contended that commercial media in China are capable of breaking the Party organ's information monopoly and of playing the role of a 'watchdog' over the government and society (e.g., Shirk, 2011; Winfield & Peng, 2005; Zhao, 2008). The most cited example supporting this contention is the Sun Zhigang incident involving the death of the namesake migrant worker, Sun Zhigang, in Guangzhou from the physical abuse he suffered while being detained under China's custody and repatriation system (Hassid, 2008; Svensson, 2012). On 20 March, 2003, 27-year-old Sun Zhigang died in the medical clinic of a detention centre in Guangzhou. He had been detained after being unable to produce his temporary living permit (*zanzhu zheng*).

After an investigative reporter published details of this event in China's most influential commercial newspaper, *Southern Metropolis Daily*, Sun's death and the C&R system provoked a furious response throughout Chinese society. Public protests occurred in several major cities and the public demanded that the government take action to avoid the same thing from happening again. On 20 June, 2003, the then Premier, Wen Jiabao, announced that the custody and repatriation system would be abolished in August 2003. This event has been seen as a victory for the commercial media and the public in terms of successfully calling for changes to China's legal system. Like the Sun Zhigang case, the Chinese commercial media have paid more attention to vulnerable groups and their inferior status, social injustices, and abuses of power at the local level—something that has rarely happened in official narratives. Therefore, the commercial media have been seen as posing a serious challenge to the Chinese government's efforts to synchronize media messages and public opinion (Stockmann, 2013).

In contrast to this optimistic view that the commercial media are capable of challenging the hegemony of the official media, other studies have suggested that in regard to significant political issues, the official media still hold the exclusive power to set the public agenda in China (Gang & Bandurski, 2011; King et al., 2013; Tai & Sun, 2007). For instance, Tilt and Xiao (2010) used the Songhua River pollution incident in 2005 as a case study to compare the power of the official and commercial media in reporting significant social crises. As this event unfolded, the government prohibited all media organizations except for the Xinhua News Agency from reporting or commenting about it. Three days after the river was polluted and the water supply for the city of Harbin (the capital of Heilongjiang province) was cut off, Xinhua published its leading coverage of this crisis under the title: 'What did we learn during the time without water?'. This article repeated the line of the State and asked the public to appreciate what the government had done to remedy the situation and to understand the difficulties facing the government (Tilt & Xiao, 2010). Indeed, such news reporting has become common in China in recent years. Examples include the ban on commercial media reporting of the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003 (Tai & Sun, 2007) and a ban on journalists visiting the site of the Wenzhou high-speed train collision in 2011 (King et al., 2013). In both cases, the Chinese government gave an exclusive voice to the Party news organs, and the forcing of commercial media outlets to comply with these state restrictions demonstrated that their power to challenge the government had been significantly weakened. Indeed, Party control of news broadcasting has not diminished, and the official media have continued to enjoy a dominant position.

Despite the two opposite opinions, it seems that China's news media industry has been simply divided into two sides, with the official media actively participating in the all-out promotion of the Party's interests, and the news workers in commercial media sectors risking being fired or jailed to increase press freedoms and independent journalism.

1.3.2 Dichotomy 2: The Struggle between Mass Media and Digital Media in Setting the Public Agenda

The advent of the digital media era has brought about a new debate and academic dichotomy about whether new communication platforms are capable of replacing traditional media in setting the public agenda in the political arena. The investigation of the ability of digital media actors has been widely researched in Chinese media studies (e.g., Chen & Reese, 2015; Esarey & Xiao, 2011; Lee, 2016; Li et al., 2016; Luo, 2014). New low-cost, digital media platforms have enabled information to be disseminated almost instantly to a wide population, and this has made state censorship far more difficult to achieve than previously. The operation of these digital platforms has led to wider and freer public discussion of political topics. Therefore, it has been argued that the Internet and social media have effectively reduced people's reliance on conventional mass media for information, and weakened the importance of both the traditional media and the government in shaping the views of the Chinese public (Fu & Chau, 2014; Jiang, 2014; Lin, 2015; Luo, 2016). While digital communication platforms have been viewed as gradually replacing the mass media and exercising a crucial role in 'network agenda-setting' (Wang, 2016) or 'reversed agenda-setting' effects (Jiang, 2014), some researchers have emphasized that the Chinese State has continued to set the political boundary in terms of what is allowed to be discussed, endowing the right to seriously discuss the political agenda to the official media outlets exclusively (e.g., Hadland, 2015; Luo, 2014; Wu, 2005).

This view regarding the agenda-setting function of digital media in China has gained considerable empirical support. Zhou and Moy (2007) examined a series of socio-political incidents in China to discuss the interplay between new media attention and national mass media coverage. They found that online public opinion and digital media have played an important role in transforming local events into nationally prominent issues, and in this way have contributed to setting the public agenda. Among diverse political and social issues, the environmental action and anti-corruption campaigns have gained the most attention in digital

media platforms. For instance, Wang (2015) conducted four case studies to examine the role of the digital media in organizing and coordinating social support for collective environmental action in rural China and the way that new media address environmental issues through mainstream media platforms. The Xiamen anti-PX chemical plant protests were considered by many studies as a milestone in the new media's agenda-setting function as they successfully forced the government to listen to public opinion and adjust its decisions accordingly (Qiang, 2011). In addition, the corruption and misbehaviour of government officials have been frequently disclosed through digital media platforms, and this has also contributed to shaping the public agenda through online anti-corruption campaigns, such as in response to the Deng Yujiao incident in 2009 (Lin, 2015; Tong, 2015). Deng Yujiao, a 21-year-old pedicure worker, tried to rebuff a local official's sexual advances and fought him off, resulting in the latter's death. The local county police subsequently arrested Deng Yujiao and charged her with homicide. This case came to national prominence through Internet forums and chatrooms where netizens expressed their outrage about her treatment. The case resonated with the wider public discontent concerning the corruption and immorality of officials, and generated over four million forum posts across the country. Following the groundswell of public protest and online petitions, prosecutors dropped the murder charges, granted her bail, and charged her with the lesser offense of 'intentional assault'. She was found guilty but did not receive a sentence due to her mental state (Tang & Sampson, 2012).

However, the other side of this dichotomy suggests that because of the huge domestic digital gap and the government's legislative regulations, the challenging function of new media has been magnified, and the traditional Party organs have continued to exercise hegemony over the dissemination of information, at least in the political arena (e.g., Chen & Reese, 2015; Guo & Chen, 2011; Wu, 2005). The digital divide has been viewed as weakening the civic function of digital communication worldwide, and the Chinese context is no exception (Norris, 2001; Prior, 2007). Although China has greatly improved its communication infrastructure in the last two decades and narrowed its digital divide with developed countries, domestically, the digital divide has been widening (Harwit, 2004; Xia & Lu, 2008; Pan et al., 2011). A typical Chinese Internet user is well-educated, urban, young, and male, while uneven telecommunication infrastructures and income/education gaps have resulted in significant differences in Internet access and use between the richer coastal regions and the poorer hinterland, along with a divide between urban and rural areas (Pan et al., 2011). Therefore, digital media-fuelled mass actions have taken place far more frequently in large cities like

Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou than rural areas in inland regions.

In addition to the digital divide, the Chinese government's persistent and strict control over the political news and information has weakened the digital media's agenda-setting function as well. Moreover, although they are permitted in the domains of media distribution and advertising, the interference or influence by private and foreign investment in the process of political news production has been strictly prohibited (Hadland, 2015). It has been recognized that new media have contributed to the diversification of news output and content in many 'soft' news categories, such as sports and entertainment. However, the government has continued to maintain its control over 'hard' news related to sensitive political or foreign policy issues. In 2005, the State Council Information Office and Ministry of Information Industry jointly published the *Provisions for the Administration of Internet News Information Services*, which stipulates the rules that Internet news service providers should obey in disseminating information. In the general provisions, it is stated that news information refers to reports and comments on politics, foreign affairs, military affairs, and public emergencies (www.gov.cn, 2005). The Chinese government has imposed restrictions on the content of news reporting related to current political affairs, while leaving other 'soft' news categories to the market mechanisms. Article 5 of the Provisions classifies online news information service providers into three groups:

(1) the Internet news information service providers established by news entities to publish the news that have not been published and broadcasted by the said entities, to provide electronic bulletin services of current affairs and politics, and to transmit communicative information of current affairs and politics to the public; (2) the Internet news information service providers established by non-news entities reprint news information, to provide electronic bulletin services of current affairs and politics, and to transmit communicative information of current affairs and politics to the public; (3) the Internet news information service providers established by news entities to publish the news information which has been published or broadcasted by the said news entities (www.gov.cn, 2005).

According to the Provisions, State-owned news websites (such as People.com.cn, which is the

online edition of the *People's Daily*, and Xinhuanet.com, which is the online edition of the Xinhua News Agency) are classified into the first and third groups. Most commercial portals in China (such as Sina and Tencent) belong to the second category. This regulation has prohibited the commercial portals from gathering news directly, which forced them to become news aggregators instead of news collectors. However, they have enjoyed the flexibility of amassing news from as many sources as possible and packaging the information in a user-friendly way (Wu, 2005). Therefore, despite the commercial portals prevailing over State-owned news websites with regards to financial profits and the user population, the content they have disseminated has merely been a copy of their State-owned counterparts. Although the Chinese people can easily access new media, the information posted on new media sites has mostly been a reproduction of official news media postings.

Despite the Provisions being published in 2005 at a time when Internet forums and chatrooms served as the main platforms for public discussion, their force and effects have been extended into the new social media epoch. While China's official, commercial, and digital-native news organizations have enthusiastically launched social media accounts and adopted social media (such as Sina Weibo) as an important platform to set public agenda and expand their influence in the digital sphere, new laws and regulations restricting news media agencies' activities on social networking sites soon followed. In June 2017, the Cyberspace Administration of China published the new edition of the Provisions, and various social media platforms were added to it, extending the scope of its regulations. Article 8 of the new Provisions clearly reaffirms that online news providers should separate their services of news gathering and editing from news dissemination, and that non-official investment in news gathering and editing is prohibited. From this perspective, although digital media may set the news agenda by serving as a first point of access for breaking news, when the authorities have ordered newspapers to censor sensitive issues during a period of crisis, online news content has followed. Therefore, although new media and online forums have become a barometer for the government in terms of sensing the public mood, and thus placing great pressure on the government in the way it deals with specific incidents, their agenda-setting function and impact on national policy-making has been limited (Luo, 2014).

The aforementioned two dichotomies regarding China's media-politics relations continue to receive scholarly attention, and numerous empirical examinations from each side have been added to the debate. However, within this 'liberalization and control' framework, three

reductionist approaches have largely been adopted, leading to a partial understanding of political communication in the Chinese context.

1.3.3 Three Reductionisms in China's Political Communication Research

This thesis argues that three interrelated reductionist approaches have been widely followed in the recent literature on China's media-politics dynamics. They are referred to here as the 'event-based', 'conflict-focused' and 'internal-homogeneity' perspectives. The first perspective includes studies that have investigated the democratic nature of China's commercial or digital media, often by examining their roles during significant political crises and events. The outcomes of these crises and events, then, have usually become the most important, or even the only criterion used to measure the 'successes' and 'failures' of the media emancipation in China. The longer-term, indirect effects of the media on Chinese society and politics have been largely overlooked (Graham, 2015; Wu, 2012).

This event-based approach has also led to a second form of reductionism—a conflict-focused perspective that differentiates between the 'winners' and 'losers' in the battle of information and communication. Previous studies in this camp have focused predominantly on the competitive and antagonistic relations between the traditional information hegemony (the Chinese government and official media) and emerging information providers and consumers (market-oriented media and a digitally savvy public), while unjustifiably ignoring how those different media actors cooperate, complement each other, and benignly interact.

Finally, these event-based and conflict-focused perspectives have given rise to a third reductionist misconception which views the various groups in China's communication space as 'internally homogeneous'. That is, various communication actors in China's media sphere have been automatically classified as belonging to distinct groups according to their sociopolitical and media identities. These include the government, official media, commercial media, and the public (social media). These taken-for-granted labels and categorizations have solidified the stereotyped image of each communicative group, and obscured the fluid social relations that have existed between them while denying differentiation and conflicts within them. As a result, an increasingly polarized and rigid picture of the media landscape in China has been produced.

The popularity of these reductionist approaches means that research in this area has largely

suffered from a narrow and partial scope, exploring the relations between the media and ‘counter-powers’ in the Chinese context rather than media-politics dynamics. Moreover, these reductionisms have tended to adopt the conventional model of studying political communication in the global South, which have usually involved focusing on the radical, rebellious, and visible effects brought by market-oriented media and online communications, while neglecting the long-term, unseen, and moderate transitions that result from media commercialization, globalization and digitalization (e.g., Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; García & Treré, 2014; Lee & Chan, 2016; Mutsvairo & Harris, 2016; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013). The following section discusses the problems associated with such reductionist approaches when studying China’s political communication space.

1.3.3.1 The Event-Based Approach

Event-based case studies are widely used in media and communication research. Political events and crises, such as presidential elections and demonstrations, and other ‘media spectacles’ in which diverse information, viewpoints, and participants converge (Volkmer, 2014), provide research examples that can be used to address questions related to media content production and consumption, media effects, as well as the interactions between the media and politics. Therefore, numerous empirical studies have been conducted to examine media-politics dynamics by focusing on specific events. In Western democracies, periodic presidential elections and campaigns have often been viewed as the most prominent political events, attracting abundant research attention to investigate media-politics dynamics, such as Barak Obama’s online campaigns in 2008 and 2012 in the US (Chadwick, 2014), and more recently, President Donald Trump’s social media strategies (Enli, 2017). In authoritarian and hybrid regimes where electoral representative democracy is absent or dysfunctional, the Internet and social media-fuelled, radical and insurgent political actions, including demonstrations, protests and riots have been chosen as research cases to investigate the social changes brought by digital communication (e.g., Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; García & Treré, 2014; Lee & Chan, 2016; Luo, 2014; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013; Yang & Kang, 2016).

In the Chinese context, the event-based approach in media studies has gained popularity as well. A number of studies have investigated the democratic and liberating role of commercial and digital media by examining their alternative coverage, and deliberative and mobilizing functions during significant political crises and mass incidents (e.g., Cairns & Carlson, 2016; Hassid, 2008; Huang & Yip, 2012; Hyun et al., 2014; Liebman, 2011; Svensson, 2012). Some

widely cited cases have included the Sun Zhigang case (Hassid, 2008; Svensson, 2012), the Wenzhou train collision (Shi et al., 2013), the Xiamen anti-PX protests (Huang & Yip, 2012), the Deng Yujiao incident (Liebman, 2011), the Sino-Japanese Diaoyu/Senkaku crisis (Cairns & Carlson, 2016; Stockmann, 2010), and the 2010 and 2012 anti-Japanese demonstrations (Hyun et al., 2014).

However, focusing on commercial media- or web-fuelled, short-lived mass incidents has usually led to one-sided conclusions that have evaluated the ‘successes’ or ‘failures’ of Chinese media emancipation solely based on the outcome of those political events. For instance, just as the Sun Zhigang case has been widely cited as representing a ‘victory’ for the commercial media and a digitally savvy public in terms of promoting change in China’s legal system (Hassid, 2008; Svensson, 2012), the Wenzhou train collision has been highlighted by scholars as evidence of the inability of commercial and online media to exert influence within China’s political sphere (Shi et al., 2013). This event-based, outcome-oriented approach has contributed to an increasingly dichotomous picture of Chinese media-politics relations in the relevant literature, as shown in Section 3.1. Both sides of this dichotomy have continuously sought to support their viewpoints by adding empirical evidence, in other words, by focusing on more events and crises.

Furthermore, this event-based perspective has tended to ignore or downplay the long-term and moderate effects brought by media commercialization and digitalization on China’s political landscape and society. Here, it is important to affirm the utility of event-based approaches in political communication research, and this thesis does not suggest that this perspective is problematic per se. Rather, it argues that the results derived from event-based case studies must be complemented by careful investigations that explore the long-term, indirect, and moderate changes that occur within China’s political communication sphere. For instance, everyday, informal political discussions have been under-researched in the Chinese context because they have not typically led to immediate or direct political actions, even though their crucial role in fostering a culture of public debate has been recognized by a few studies (Graham, 2015; Wu, 2012). Moreover, Lee (2016) highlighted the significance of an emerging lifestyle political culture in the Chinese online sphere—the ‘online satirical campaign’ (*egao*). He suggested that this campaign should be viewed as ‘a participatory activity involving multitudes of people interacting through digital networks’, but it has received little systematic attention (Lee, 2016, p. 1062).

Therefore, this thesis suggests that when researching China's media-politics dynamics, focusing on specific domestic or international events, crises and incidents is likely to produce a biased understanding. A notable example is the Chinese media's practice and function in regard to Sino-Japanese relations. Except for a very few research, such as Chan's (2014) work, that examined China's media reporting on specific bilateral crisis from a nuanced perspective and provided comprehensive analyses, the majority of studies argued that the Chinese media (both official news agencies and social media platforms) have demonstrated a unanimously hostile sentiment towards Japan, which have played a significant role in deteriorating Sino-Japanese relations. These studies have usually focused on the Chinese media's reporting and discussions during significant bilateral events, such as the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute in 2012 and China's anti-Japanese demonstrations in 2005, 2010 and 2012 (e.g., Cairns & Carlson, 2016; Denmark & Chubb, 2016; Lye & Wu, 2013; Reilly, 2011; Stockmann, 2013). However, as the 'rally around the flag effect' suggests that the media and public usually uncritically stand with the government during periods of international crisis or war (Mueller, 1970), it is problematic to generalize about Chinese media practices and the influence of such 'crisis reporting' and discussions. Extending the scope of studies to embrace wider time-periods which include peacetime Sino-Japanese relations might provide more reliable findings in regard to the differentiation and segmentation of views within the Chinese media and related public discussions.

1.3.3.2 Conflict-Focused Perspective

The event-based approach described in the previous section has, to some extent, contributed to a second form of reductionism—a conflict-focused perspective that narrows its research scope to the confrontations between various communicative participants, and differentiates 'winners' and 'losers' in the battle for new information and communication in the Chinese context.

While some studies have suggested that the unprecedented level of access to and use of digital communication technologies have dramatically changed the power relations in China, empowered journalists and grassroots, and contributed to social upheavals, others have opposed this viewpoint by emphasizing the continuing influence and power of the Chinese government in repressing the media and public debate in China despite the emergence of a globalized and digitalized communication sphere (e.g., Chen & Reese, 2015; Chin, 2014;

Esarey & Xiao, 2011; Guo & Chen, 2011; Hyun & Kim, 2015; Wu, 2005). These studies have usually concluded that there are some linear causal connections between the existence of a ‘digital-savvy grassroots’ and the ‘victory of democracy’, and between the government’s advantageous adoption of new media and authoritarian resilience. The premise of this conflict-focused reductionism is that access to diverse and alternative sources of information should automatically lead to the public’s critical attitudes toward the government and a desire for democratic change. Therefore, this approach seems to view ‘challenging, dissenting voices’ as the overwhelming outcome of China’s media commercialization and digitalization.

However, a few studies have realized the problems of leaping to such conclusions on the basis of this conflict-focused perspective, and have been reticent to talk about the resistant, liberating, and democratic potential of the commercial and digital media just because they provide alternative sources of information and platforms for civic engagement (e.g., Hyun & Kim, 2015; Li et al., 2016; Wang & Shen, 2017). Their findings have shown that in the Chinese context, commercial- or new media-facilitated mass deliberation and civic participation can coexist, and even positively interact with the existing political systems. For instance, Li and his colleagues (2016) found the dual political impacts of social media and the compatibility between civic culture and the system support in Chinese online ecology. They suggested that on the one hand, public affairs communication via social media relates positively to civic culture, while on the other, social media-based political discussion does not undermine system support, even suggesting that it is strongly related to optimism about the Chinese government. Similarly, Wang and Shen’s (2017) findings illustrated that online criticism can lead to an increase in perceived communication freedom and citizens’ satisfaction rather than dissatisfaction with government in China. The Chinese context, with its traditional culture and censored media environment, provides two explanations for this ‘criticism-leads-to-satisfaction’ viewpoint. First, in feudal China, an emperor who was willing to listen to the public was considered a benevolent emperor and received public praise (Zhang & Sun, 2011). Therefore, tolerance towards critical comments at that time was regarded as an indicator of good governance, fostering a positive assessment of the authority. In addition, in the context of the present, decade-long, censored environment, grassroots criticism of the government has signalled a loosened control on information flow, which has been taken as a sign of protecting citizens’ freedom of speech and, therefore, exerting positive influence on political judgment (Wang & Shen, 2017).

Here too it is necessary to affirm the value of studying the contention, competition and struggle that exists in China's political communication sphere since such interactions represent some profound changes that have occurred in China's media landscape. Media commercialization, globalization and digitalization have significantly undermined the Leninist-style, rigid propaganda mechanisms in China and diversified the previously 'unified' political discourse, while also changing the pattern of 'top-down' information flow, all of which have contributed to an increasingly vigorous and contentious communication sphere (e.g., Cairns & Carlson, 2016; Denmark & Chubb, 2016; Guo, 2017; Huang, 2007; Lee, 2016; Shirk, 2010; Zhao, 1998). However, the current literature has focused predominantly on the competitive and antagonistic relations between the traditional information hegemony (the Chinese government and official media) and emerging information providers and consumers (market-oriented media and digitally savvy public), while unjustifiably ignoring how these different media actors cooperate, complement each other, and benignly interact. This conflict-focused approach sheds less light on the complexity of interdependence between seemingly contradictory players, their love-hate relationships, and their ever-changing interactions. Therefore, the insufficient investigation of the multi-faceted dynamics among diverse actors is unlikely to provide a comprehensive understanding of China's political communication sphere.

The conflict-focused perspective has not stood the test of time. Twenty-four years have passed since China embraced the Internet, and China's political, social, and media spaces have demonstrated a persistent stability in spite of the occasional occurrence of Internet and social media-fuelled demonstrations. Subversive political revolutions such as those witnessed in the MENA region have not taken place in China. The Chinese government's successful censorship and other controlling mechanisms cannot fully explain this relative sociopolitical stability. Instead, this thesis argues that this relatively stable picture illustrates that the antagonisms, conflict, and incompatibility between various media participants are just one side of the story, and the other side includes the cooperative, complementary, and reciprocal interactions in China's political communication space that have been significantly understated. As the conflict-focused perspective is largely derived from the event (crisis)-based approach, some longitudinal observation and analysis could be conducted to overcome this form of reductionism. By exploring the media's reporting and public discussions that have occurred over a longer time period rather than focusing on select incidents, the consistency and changes of the practices of various communication actors and their dynamic, multifaceted

interactions are likely to be better understood.

1.3.3.3 Internal-Homogeneity Perspective

The event-based and conflict-focused perspectives discussed in the previous section give rise to the third reductionist misconception which views the various groups in China's communication sphere as 'internally homogeneous'. Many scholars have recognized that the media-politics dynamics in the Chinese context unfolded in a network-connected space in which a mass of communicative actors subjectively engage in reshuffling or reinforcing existing power relations by producing and disseminating political information, deliberating about public affairs, propagating the will of the authorities, and mobilizing collective actions (e.g., Chen & Reese, 2015; Esarey & Xiao, 2011; Huang & Yip, 2012; Medaglia & Yang, 2017; Stockmann & Luo, 2015). However, most studies have automatically classified various communication actors in China's media sphere into distinct groups based on their sociopolitical and media identities, including the government, official media, commercial media, and the public (usually equated with social media). Within this unconscious, taken-for-granted labelling and categorization, the interactions between different communication groups have been explored.

However, the differentiation and self-division within the same communication groups in China's media sphere have been relatively ignored. For instance, the Chinese public has been viewed by many studies as a challenging force in China's digital sphere in terms of resisting the State's authoritarian media censorship stance, while largely ignoring the existence of the volunteer, pro-government voices and politically indifferent groups among the Chinese people (Guo, 2017; Han, 2015). Another communicative group—the Chinese journalists who work in market-oriented news agencies—has usually been seen as pursuing 'Western-style' press freedom and professionalism, neglecting a sub-group of the 'workday journalists' who are simply interested in money and steady employment and who are politically and socially quiescent (Hassid, 2011). The official Chinese media have shown considerable transformations and self-divisions in the digital epoch as well (Huang & Lu, 2017; Song & Chang, 2016), but they have still been labelled by numerous studies as old-style propaganda apparatus. While the traditional Party press have continually used the 'main theme' as a fundamental standard in selecting and presenting political topics, their social media accounts have usually adopted some grassroots' presentation methods (such as using trivialized and sensational terms) to provoke netizens' responses and engagement (Huang & Lu, 2017).

More recently, a small number of studies have pointed to the multiplicity and heterogeneity that has existed within/among China's communication groups through their empirical investigations (Guo, 2017; Wang et al., 2017). Guo's (2017) research (employing a focus group approach) conceptualized the use of Wechat among Chinese adults. She examined participants' attitudes and practices when they encountered alternative political news and information in the digital world, classifying them into the four types involving the 'activist', 'cautious watchdog', 'lurker', and 'filterer'. Despite presenting empirical evidence for the diversity of WeChat users in terms of the political content of their discussions, Guo's (2017) study suffers limitations in regard to its ability to support strong generalizations about China's political communication space because her relatively small research sample ($n = 35$) targeted a specific, limited age cohort (aged 50 years or older) living in a specific location (Shanghai). Another study by Wang, Spark and Yu (2017) suggested that Chinese official newspapers should not simply be viewed as an indiscriminate whole that is closely controlled by the Party and plays the role of expounding the political priorities of the sponsoring party body. Their study re-categorized the Chinese press into the three types of 'official', 'market-oriented', and 'popular official' media. By investigating the journalism practiced by the *China Youth Daily* (CYD), their results illustrated that it is possible to combine the status of an official newspaper with a news orientation that stresses more market-friendly journalism, defining the CYD as a 'popular official medium' (Wang et al., 2017). At the same time, however, their study's findings are also limited in their generalizability because they focused examination on a specific newspaper, without exploring the distribution of this type of 'official popular journalism' in a general media landscape.

The reductionism of this 'internal-homogeneity' perspective has solidified the stereotyped image of each communicative group, coagulating the fluid social relations and denying the differentiation and conflicts that exist within the same groups of media actors. Within this perspective, conflicts between different groups have been exaggerated while the differences within the same groups have been largely neglected. As a result, an increasingly antagonistic and polarized picture of the Chinese media landscape has been produced in which the features and trends of China's political communication sphere have been overly generalized, thus recapitulating the second type of 'conflict-focused' reductionism.

In general, the aforementioned three reductionist approaches have tended to overemphasize

select aspects, characteristics and trends of China's political communication sphere, including digitally-enhanced public deliberation, the new media-fuelled discontent (towards the Chinese government), and radical but short-lived mass incidents. Discussions about media-politics relations in the Chinese context, therefore, have been largely simplified in terms of how the media have been used to counter the state's power. From this perspective, most current studies on China's political communication have not so much examined the relations between the media and politics but rather examined the relations between the media and what the French political theorist Rosanvallon (2008) defined as 'counter-politics'.

Rosanvallon (2008) put forth the concept of 'counter-politics' (or counter-democracy) to describe individuals who act as the watchdogs, veto-wielders and judges (of politicians and policies) but who are less interested in pursuing sustained political actions to achieve positive political goals (Couldry, 2015; Rosanvallon, 2008). The notion of counter-politics, according to Rosanvallon (2008), does not imply the opposite of democracy, but rather a form of democracy that complements and reinforces the usual electoral democratic processes through the power of 'distrust'— an indirect form of power disseminated throughout society. Rosanvallon (2008) further defined three dimensions of counter-democracy involving (1) 'powers of oversight', which refers to the various means by which citizens are able to monitor the actions of political authorities, (2) 'forms of prevention', referring to the public's ability to organize resistance against specific policies, and (3) 'testing of judgment', which represents the trend toward the 'juridification' of politics when individuals or social groups use the courts, and especially jury trials, to bring delinquent politicians to account.

Unlike in Western nations where electoral democracy is legally guaranteed and counter-democracy is viewed as complementary, in the Chinese context, where general multi-party elections are absent, some forms of 'negative' political participation (counter-politics) have been considered the most profound incentive for, and a result of, democratization (Wu, 2012; Zhang & Lin, 2014). Therefore, the ways that the media functions in the context of Chinese 'counter-politics' have attracted the most research attention, meaning that other forms of interactions between various participants in China's political communication space have been unjustifiably ignored. The reductionism involved in the three mentioned approaches in examining China's digital politics tends to produce a simplified picture of political communication in China's digital sphere, particularly in regard to 'how the new media (are used to)-counter power'. Such reductionism and simplification,

however, represents the conventional model of studying political communication in the global South context, which usually involves focusing on the radical, rebellious, and visible effects brought by digital technologies and networked communication while largely neglecting the long-term, unseen, moderate, and intra-group transitions that result from media globalization and digitalization (e.g., Burch & León, 2014; Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; García & Treré, 2014; Gumede, 2016; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013).

By reviewing the current literature on China-focused political communication studies, Section 1.3 offers a critical reflection on the prevailing perspective of ‘liberation and control’ and the reductionisms derived from it. To overcome the reductionisms in current studies and provide a comprehensive picture of media-politics relations in China, a more dynamic research framework which recognizes and explores the complicated, multifaceted, ever-changing, and sometimes paradoxical interconnections among various participants in China’s media spaces is developed in Chapter 2.

Conclusion

Chapter 1 has reviewed the existing literature that has conceptualized and contextualized media-politics relations in the digital epoch, both in global and Chinese context. Those studies have addressed questions of whether the new, digital media are able to facilitate public discussion and civic participation and form a cross-boundary public sphere, that can refine democracy in democratic nations and bring democratization to authoritarian regimes. However, these studies usually examine the dynamics between digital media and politics from a linear and causal perspective, treating digital communication as a ‘technology and information highland’ in which political authorities, traditional news organizations and the public struggle and compete. Their results are likely to differentiate ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in the battle of digital information and communication, concluding that there are some linear causalities between the ‘digital-savvy grassroots’ and the ‘victory of democracy’, between the governments’ advantageous adoption of new media and authoritarian resilience, as well as between the rise of citizen journalism and the demise of traditional news production. These approaches shed less light on the complexity of interdependence between seemingly contradictory players, their love-hate relationships and their ever-changing interactions. The insufficient investigation of the multi-faceted dynamics among diverse actors in the political communication space often misleads the research to a conflict-laden conclusion.

Therefore, a few strand of communication theorists has abandoned the linear and causal perspective and developed some more comprehensive and dynamic approaches, viewing today's political communication as an evolving process during which various participants engage, compete, cooperate, struggle, and complement each other under the disparate logics of network-connectedness, hybridity and heterarchy (e.g. Castells, 2007; Chadwick, 2014; Jenkins, 2004; Vaccari et al., 2015; Volkmer, 2014; Wolfsfeld et al., 2016). The next chapter introduces this networked and process-oriented approach in researching media-politics dynamics, and puts forward the theoretical framework of this thesis by integrating the fundamentally homogenous mechanism of networked connectedness, which has resulted from media globalization and digitalization, with heterogeneous configurations and internal logics of national political communication spaces, which are influenced by social contexts.

2 Theoretical Framework: Networked Political Communication Spaces towards Interactive Axes of ‘Actor, Connector and Interlocutor’

Chapter 1 reviewed the literature that has conceptualized and contextualized the media-politics dynamics in the digital epoch, mapping the general landscape of political communication studies. It observes that the academic dichotomy between the ‘digital optimism’ views that applaud the empowering effects of digital communication on civic engagement; and ‘digital pessimism’ perspectives that lament minority groups’ advantageous adoption of ICTs has further sharpened the existing power gap (e.g., Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Bimber, 2017; Dahlgren, 2005; Morozov, 2011; Prior, 2007). The literature review found different research emphases when examining political communication arrangements in Western democratic contexts, which have mainly focused on the role of digital initiatives in facilitating the public’s formal and conventional political participation, and in the global South, which has shed more light on exploring new media’s functions in some radical and insurgent political actions. Chapter 1 also narrowed down the scope to China, the research subject of this thesis, reviewing the current literature on China’s media-politics dynamics as well as introducing three reductionist approaches dominant in current studies.

This chapter represents the theoretical framework of this thesis. It introduces the specific lens this thesis has taken—‘digitally networked communication’ and the research model of the ‘actor, connector and interlocutor’. Through adopting this lens, internationally observed theoretical and conceptual developments in media and politics studies are integrated with national contexts, and further localized within the research subject of this thesis—China’s political communication spheres. The key premise of this chapter (and of this thesis) is that the emergence of a globally network-connected political communication space does not necessarily entail the vanishing of national spaces. Rather, it proposes that the global communication space is multi-layered, and it holds that from the perspective of the density of political information flow, the networked political communication space is primarily national, but expands to transnational, regional, and global spaces. The universality-individuality dynamics of the networked political communication space are explored in this chapter.

This chapter is organized as follows. It first discusses the ‘networked approach’ that formulates today’s political communication as an evolving process in which various participants engage, compete, cooperate, struggle, and complement each other under the

disparate logic of network connectedness, media convergence and hybridity (see Section 2.1). Section 2.2 explains the primary role of the national communication sphere in wider transnational, regional and global spaces, followed by associating the networked communication approach with comparative analyses and exploring the concurrence of global influence and national resilience in digital spheres (see Section 2.3). Then, Section 2.4 introduces the specific research lens this thesis adopted. In particular, this chapter applies Volkmer's (2014) interactive axes of 'actor, connector and interlocutor', which proposes that media platforms, institutions and individuals interact and play the roles of the actor, connector and interlocutor by producing, delivering, accelerating and magnifying content within the chosen logics of subjective networks across a globalized scope. By contextualizing Volkmer's (2014) model of the 'actor, connector and interlocutor', this chapter uses three sets of indicators (degrees of media development, communication freedom, and societal supportiveness) to classify national communication spaces (see Section 2.5). It categorizes 21 randomly selected nations into three distinctive types of communication spaces, involving the 'symmetrical and fully-fledged', 'vigorous but censored', and 'infertile and unresponsive' spaces, and analyses their characteristics and distribution in the world, their interactions between diverse media participants, as well as their linkage to other national, regional, and global communication spaces (see Section 2.6). At last, Section 2.7 applies the typology of the 'vigorous but censored space' to the Chinese context, defining the roles of the actor, connector, and interlocutor played by various communicative participants and proposing the power relations among them. Drawing on this typology, it explores the complicated, multifaceted, ever-changing, and sometimes paradoxical interconnections among various media participants in China's political communication space—all of which have operated under the globally similar logic of networked connectedness, but have been strongly influenced by China's discretely political, economic, cultural, and societal trajectories.

The typology of the national communication spaces is the key theoretical contribution of this thesis. It has important implications for the debate on digital politics, by integrating the fundamentally homogeneous mechanism of network connectedness that has resulted from media digitalization and globalization and the heterogeneous configurations of national political communication spaces that are strongly influenced by enduring social contexts. The chapter provides conceptual support for the viewpoint that national political communication cultures will continue to be significant in today's digitalized and globalized world (Canei & Voltmer, 2014; Esser & Pfetsch, 2017; Mancini, 2015), and offers a systematic framework

that can be applied by future empirical studies to test the varying digital political communication processes across diverse societies.

2.1 The Networked Approach, Media Convergence and Hybridity

Some communication theorists have abandoned the linear and causal perspective that treating digital communication as a ‘technology and information highland’ in which political authorities, traditional news organizations and the public struggle and compete. Instead, they have developed more comprehensive and dynamic approaches, viewing today’s political communication as an evolving process during which various participants engage, compete, cooperate, struggle, and complement each other under the disparate logics of network-connectedness and hybridity (e.g, Castells, 2007; Chadwick, 2014; Jenkins, 2004; Vaccari et al., 2015; Volkmer, 2014; Wolfsfeld et al., 2016). Since Castells (2007, 2011, 2013) first formally put forward the concept of ‘networked society’ and ‘mass self-communication’, scholars have furthered the study of networked communication by developing the concepts of ‘media convergence’ (Jenkins, 2004), ‘hybrid media system’ (Chadwick, 2014), ‘dual screening politics’ (Vaccari et al., 2015), ‘networked fourth estate’ (Benkler, 2013), ‘media repertoire’ (Wolfsfeld et al, 2016), and the most relevant concepts for this study— the ‘reflectively and subjectively transnational communication sphere’ and the ‘actor, connector and interlocutor’ model by Volkmer (2014). These far-sighted contributions ‘think outside the box’ of digital media as technology and platforms used by various actors, and explore the structural, logical and habitual changes to the overall political communication landscape, which are brought by the dissemination of digitally networked information, participant interdependence and power relations.

The key concept of Castells (2007, 2011, 2013) is ‘network’— network society, network power, network capital, and network communication. A network consists of a set of interconnected nodes. The definition of a node, according to Castells (2011), ‘depends on the kind of concrete networks of which we speak’ (p. 501). For instance, if the political network that governs the European Union is discussed, the nodes are national councils of ministers and European Commissioners. With respect to the global media network, the nodes are television systems, entertainment studios, the computer graphics milieu, news teams, and mobile devices that generate, transmit, and receive signals (Castells, 2011). Networks are open structures that can expand without limits, integrating new nodes as long as they are able to communicate within the network, that is, as long as they share the same communication codes.

Therefore, a network-based social structure is a highly dynamic, open system that is susceptible to innovation without threatening its balance. Beginning with a discussion of the media and communication network, Castells (2007) further defined a new form of communication brought by the diffusion of digital technology as mass self-communication for two reasons. He referred to mass communication because ‘it reaches potentially a global audience through the peer-to-peer networks and Internet connection’ (p. 248). Simultaneously, it is self-communication because ‘it is self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many’ (p. 248). In contrast to the traditional mass media that are viewed as ‘one-to-many’ and ‘vertical’, digital communication is seen as ‘many-to-many’ and ‘horizontal’ (Castells, 2010; Volkmer, 2014). Despite proposing the concept of mass self-communication, Castells was not opposed to the concepts of mass communication and mass self-communication; instead, he demonstrated that there has been a growing interaction between horizontal and vertical networks of communication, and between mass and digital media.

Since its emergence, the concept of networked communication has provided a starting point for further investigation of the digital media ecology as a dynamic process, rather than as a reconfigured and static endpoint. A number of classic and normative media theories have been modified by the ‘networked’ approach, and new concepts have been redeveloped, such as ‘networked framing’ (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013) and the ‘networked fourth estate’ (Benkler, 2013). Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) examined the way media framing unfolds in a crowd-centered, networked environment and suggested that frames were persistently revised, rearticulated, and re-dispersed by both the crowd and the elite. Benkler (2013) claimed that the traditional role of a free press as the fourth estate in providing a public check on the branches of governments has been supplemented by a set of practices, organizing models and digital technologies in the contemporary network-connected sphere.

Furthermore, some scholars have started a new strand of thinking on media ecology that has investigated the consequence of increasingly deepened networked communication— media convergence and hybridity (Chadwick, 2014; Vaccari et al., 2015; Wolfsfeld et al., 2016). From a cultural perspective, Jenkins (2004) originally outlined the theory of media convergence, defining it as ‘both a top-down, corporate-driven process and a bottom-up, consumer-driven process’ (p. 37). While these two processes can sometimes reinforce each other and create rewarding relations, they can also struggle and redefine the face of American

popular culture (Jenkins, 2004). Chadwick (2014, 2017) extended the research on the convergent media environment by positing the conception of the 'hybrid media system'. He used Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign to exemplify the role and function of hybrid media in politics, suggesting that the significance of Obama's campaign was not the use of the Internet per se but the successful integration of online, broadcast, and real space, the combination of newer and older media logics. The most recent U.S. presidential campaign (2016) illustrated the political use of hybrid media again. The real-space spectacles of candidate appearances generated important television coverage that remained crucial for projecting the power of a candidate and for conveying enthusiasm, authenticity, and common purpose to both activists and non-activists. Yet these television-fuelled moments were also integrated with newer media logics of data-gathering, online fundraising, tracking, monitoring, and managed volunteerism. Based on hybrid media thinking, dual screening or two screening has been a more recent idea in this field, which is defined as 'the bundle of practices that involve integrating, and switching across and between, live broadcast media and social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter' (Vaccari et al., 2015, p. 1041). To put it simply, dual screening refers to the practices that individuals are able both to watch programs provided by traditional media, especially television, and simultaneously express their own opinions through social media applications in real time. The concept of dual screening has reconfigured the relationships between passive information-reception activities that are usually related to traditional mass media and active information-seeking and information – production activities that are usually related to new, digital communication. Dual screening has blurred the lines between active and passive practices and underscored the combination of two practices (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2015; Vaccari et al., 2015). Wolfsfeld and his colleagues' (2016) idea of 'political information repertoires' has drawn a more macro and inclusive picture of mediated politics, integrating all forms of communicative actors, means and information. They have taken 'repertoire' to refer to 'the entire stock of skills, techniques, or devices used in a particular field or occupation' (Wolfsfeld et al., 2016, p. 2098). Therefore, political information repertoires refer to the particular combination of sources people use to learn about the political world. The strict distinction between 'old' and 'new' media is no longer applicable because the two now co-exist and interact under a networked mechanism. This networked perspective provides a starting point and premise for this thesis to explore political communication arrangement in the contemporary Chinese context.

2.2 The Global, Multilayer Networks and the Roles of the National Communication Sphere

It should be noted that in exploring the dynamics of media politics, national contextual influences are not considered opposite but complementary and necessary within a networked approach. It proposes that the global, political communication space is a multi-layered network that consists of local, national, transnational and regional spheres that interact and are interdependent. Among the multiple layers of the networked communicative space are national spaces that have not been monopolistic, but still play a primary and central role. The significance of the national communication sphere is not that digital communication has broken down territorial boundaries, but rather that the density of political information flow has resulted from a set of factors, including the public's waning interest in foreign politics, the mass and digital media's insufficient coverage of international news, language barriers, and the state's censorship of content from abroad.

Previous literature on foreign news reporting and transnational political communication has illustrated that, compared with domestic political news, international news has occupied a minority position from both the information supply and demand perspectives (Aalberg et al., 2013; Norris, 1995; Segev, 2017). Evidence from a number of studies has suggested that mass media outlets have given relatively little attention to foreign affairs across the globe, especially since the late 1980s, such as media in the US (Norris, 1995; Shaw, 2001), Europe (Moore & Loyn, 2010; Papathanassopoulos, 2002), and Asia (Wang et al., 2013). More recently, in a large-scale study of 33 television stations in 17 countries, Cohen (2013) found much less presence of foreign news than domestic news. Others have investigated this issue from the consumer and demand perspectives, illustrating that a low level of foreign affairs coverage has been due to a lack of audience interest (Aalberg et al., 2013; Hamilton, 2010). For instance, Aalberg and colleagues' (2013) survey data in 11 countries confirmed that citizens in all countries found domestic news more interesting than international news. In addition, it was found that digital communication had not fundamentally changed the asymmetrical proportion of domestic and international news in media networks and that a greater variety of sources did not necessarily lead to a broader representation of the world (Segev, 2017). Compared with international news agencies, the online news aggregators (e.g., Google and Yahoo) have displayed less foreign coverage because they have relied on PageRank algorithms, which prioritize more popular and well-known news sites and, therefore, produce an even narrower, domestic focus (Watanabe, 2013).

The language barrier is another crucial factor that has prioritized national communication spheres over other layers. Theoretically, participants can engage in a global communication network as long as they have a digital application connected to the Internet (Castells, 2011, 2013). However, in practice, linguistic barriers have significantly reduced the effectiveness and reciprocity of global communication, and impeded mass engagement in a majority of nations in the global South, narrowing digitally political discussion and deliberation within a minority of English-savvy elite groups. Because of the language barrier, it has been impractical, for example, to expect smooth, direct, large-scale, people-to-people communication in China, Russia, Iraq, and Colombia, even though they are connected to a networked, global communication sphere. The public have been able to receive the latest breaking news in distant regions of the world in several seconds, but they have understood and discussed political information primarily in their national communication sphere, for example, by national mass media's 'domestication' of global news (Alasuutari et al., 2013; Olausson, 2014). Then, through the translation and representation of a few of the foreign language-savvy groups or media professionals, such as foreign correspondents and news agencies, the national resonance has diffused to the wider communication spheres.

State-exercised censorship in the communication sphere has been widely observed in countries where a free press and free Internet have not been fully realized, such as in Russia (Schimpfoss & Yablokov, 2014), China (Tai, 2014), India (Rajkhowa, 2015), Turkey (Behrouzian et al., 2016), and Sub-Saharan Africa (Gumede, 2016). According to Freedom House (2017), approximately 13% of the global population lives in countries where the media are 'completely free', with the remaining living in media systems that are 'partially free' or 'not free at all'. This suggests that the majority of countries around the world have suffered from censorship, with the governments in these nations temporarily or permanently blocking information from the outside world on sensitive political issues, such as human rights and democratizing reforms, that has been considered by rulers as dangerous to their legitimacy and social stability. The state censorship mechanism, which is usually cautious, skeptical and even hostile to a free, global information flow on political topics, has further solidified the invisible boundaries of the national communication sphere, although these boundaries have become increasingly porous.

By combining those media, political, cultural and linguistic attributes, this study proposes that

the national communication sphere displays the densest extent of news and content flow on politics. Therefore, from this perspective of the density of political information flow, the political communication space is primarily national, and then expands to the transnational, regional, or global spheres, which are highly region- and event-dependent (for instance, national communication spheres are apt to transform to regional ones in Europe and the Middle East). In Europe where the level of regional integration has been high, national communication and regional spheres have actively interacted, and national politics have easily entered the discussion in the regional communication sphere (Brüggemann & Schulz-Forberg, 2009; Koopmans & Erbe, 2004). In the Middle East, political communication networks have also been open to regional debates due to this region's conflict-laden context and language proximity. In addition, this study also proposes that the magnitude of the event is a crucial factor in determining the expansion of the national to transnational or even global communication spheres. For example, the very high prominence of the Arab Spring events made it soon become a global media spectacle, engaging with public discussion and news reports across the world (Hänska Ahy, 2016). As such, considering their primary role in the global communication sphere, national contexts have continued to matter in globalized and digitalized political information flows.

2.3 A Cross-National, Comparative Perspective in Researching Networked Communication

To provide a more comprehensive understanding of networked public communication in the global sphere, a cross-national, comparative analysis perspective is examined in this chapter. 'Comparative analysis' and 'digitally networked communication' are two frequently used terms in the field of political communication, but may appear unrelated. While comparative political communication research has made considerable progress over the past decades with the employment of more complex designs leading to more diverse and sophisticated insights, it has seldom included the study of digital media environments in cross-national comparisons (de Vreese, 2017; Mancini, 2015). Furthermore, new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and digitally networked connectedness have been viewed as significant forces reshaping media-politics relations worldwide, whereas a comparative approach has rarely been employed in digital politics research except for a few generalization trials (Groshek, 2009; Lilleker & Jackson, 2011; Ward et al., 2008). Taking this segregation into consideration, scholars have suggested that examining the role of networked communication in comparative political communication research could be a crucial next step in investigations

of this field (e.g., Canei & Voltmer, 2014; de Vreese, 2017; Esser & Pfetsch, 2017). However, such comprehensive and holistic investigations that have developed applicable measurements and have systematically explored the similarities and differences of digitally-reconfigured political communication processes across diverse societies have been lacking.

This thesis addresses this research gap by comparing political communication in networked digital spheres, examining cross-national differences (and similarities) with respect to political information flow. Because comparative political communication research is a broad field comprising several sub-fields, de Vreese (2017) identified its four key areas, each of which has subsequently been examined in some influential works. The key areas identified include media and political systems (Aalberg et al., 2010; Hallin & Mancini, 2004), political and election news (Shoemaker & Cohen, 2010; Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008); political communication in the EU (Boomgaarden et al., 2013), and political journalists (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1991; Martins et al., 2011). While fully acknowledging the crucial contributions previous studies have made to this area and acknowledging that the models and indicators they developed are still of strong relevance, this research narrows its scope to conduct a cross-national comparison of political information flow in digital spheres. Compared with other components of the political communication system (e.g., political parallelism and journalist professionalism), political information flow—the way and the process in which news and content about politics are produced, consumed, and diffused—has experienced some obvious and fundamental changes in recent decades as a result of media digitalization. Many scholars have argued that in today’s online environments, political information flows are no longer linear processes characterized by conflicts and compromises between politicians and journalists; rather, they unfold in a digitally, network-connected space in which a mass of communicative actors subjectively engage in reshuffling or reinforcing existing power relations by producing and disseminating political news, deliberating about public affairs, propagating the will of authorities, and mobilizing collective actions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Castells, 2011; Chadwick, 2017; Volkmer, 2014). These observations mean that an updated research framework that conceptually explains the varying processes of political information flow and interactions and power relations among various communicative participants in diverse contexts, has become important.

However, the ‘digitally networked’ perspective seems to deemphasize comparative communication research, because it usually places stress on similar mechanisms of digital

interconnectedness and interdependence globally—mechanisms that rupture territorial boundaries—but tends to downplay the influence of national contexts on the specific formation of communication spheres. Since transnational information flow and political integration have been viewed as having a ‘convergent effect’ on national media systems toward an American-style liberal model, media digitalization is likely to provide more support for the perception of a globally homogenous communication sphere in which national differences are no longer relevant. Taking this viewpoint, a few theory-driven generalization studies and empirical validation studies have explored the similar mass-mobilizing and deliberating effects of ICTs on people’s political and social lives across different national contexts (e.g. Groshek, 2009; Lilleker & Jackson, 2011; Ward et al., 2008).

While some studies have drawn generalized conclusions regarding political communication in the new media era, others have contended that national contexts have continued to matter in today’s globalized and digitalized world. They have suggested the significance of distinct political systems, social cultures, media traditions and histories in shaping specific political communication arrangements, stressing the importance of national characteristics and resilience in the global digital sphere. Recent case studies have adopted such an approach, focusing their attention on particular nations, such as China (He, 2014), Morocco (El Marzouki, 2016), Indonesia (Rahman, 2017), and Ethiopia (Gagliardone, 2016). Other studies have compared digitally enhanced public discussions and civic engagement in countries in the global South with those in the U.S. and UK, viewing the Western model of political communication as the worldwide norm (e.g., Jackson & Wang, 2013; Harlow & Harp, 2012).

Despite such dichotomous viewpoints regarding the role of digital environments in comparative political communication, it is surprising that comprehensive and holistic investigations that aim to develop applicable measurements and systematically explore cross-national differences (or similarities) between digital-networked political communication spaces have been lacking. The universality-individuality dynamics of political information flow in digital spheres are thoroughly explored in this chapter. The thesis employs Volkmer’s (2014) interactive axes of ‘actor, connector and interlocutor’ framework as its theoretical lens, since this model illustrates well the specific way that transnational political information flows within a digital ecology. By developing some practical, reliable and representative indicators, Volkmer’s model is contextualized by classifying national communication spaces across the globe into three distinct types.

2.4 Interactive Axes of ‘Actor, Connector and Interlocutor’ and the Analytical dimensions

Volkmer (2014) provides a significant input to the scholarly debate on digital communication by proposing that transnational communication spaces are networked, reflective, and subjectively chosen. She argues that global public communication has recently been undergoing a significant transformation from institution- or place-based media outlet dissemination to process-oriented information flows.

In *The Global Public Sphere: Public Communication in the Age of Reflexive Interdependence*, Volkmer (2014) developed the research model of the ‘actor, connector and interlocutor’, which specifically explains the way communicative spheres operate and information flows in a transnational space. This model proposes that various media platforms, institutions and individuals interact and play the roles of actor, connector and interlocutor by ‘producing, delivering, accelerating and magnifying content’ within the chosen logics of subjective networks across a globalized scope (Volkmer, 2014, p. 2). Her model proposes that the media’s power and influence are situated in a reflective sphere where each media output (e.g., political news from mass media, a story from YouTube, and net users’ comments on Facebook) can be seen as a reflective node. The information that flows among numerous reflective nodes forms an infinite, digitally connected, and subjectively chosen space. The public communication and political information flow that exists in this space can be understood in terms of a three-step process (identification, acceleration and dialogical connectedness), and each step shows a one-to-one correspondence with three roles of the actor, connector and interlocutor.

The *actor* could be understood as the process of ‘intensification’, which refers to the original resources of information and media content that can be acquired from, for example, national mass media coverage, personal blogs, or official government websites. Volkmer (2014) has argued that in an age where public communication consists of an open, infinite network, there is almost no restriction on the media forms of the actor role—as long as the information can enter the communicative network—whereas experiences in various national contexts may tell a different story regarding the role of actor. In societies where press and Internet freedom are being seriously violated, the more powerful media participants—usually the state and official media—have operated as a monopolistic actor in the communication space with issues related

to politics (e.g., Gumede, 2016; Tai & Sun, 2007).

The *connector* could be considered as the process of ‘acceleration’, which consists of different media nodes that subjectively connect with each other by the ‘retweeting of content, creating appropriation in a transnational context’ (Volkmer, 2014, p. 145). This role could take place, for example, during the Arab Spring protests, when students in Tunisia saw images of protests in small Tunisian villages and made them ‘go viral’ on Facebook and Twitter, so as to attract media and public attention worldwide. The Chinese context has also provided numerous examples for the ‘connector’ dimension, such as when a college student uploaded the news from a local morning newspaper regarding the sudden death of a migrant worker to a nationally popular online forum (see Sun Zhigang’s case, Hassid, 2008; Svensson, 2012) or, alternatively, when an official media organization of the Xinhua News Agency picks up stories from the Internet or social media and reports them on its own platform.

The third role in the communicative process is the *interlocutor*, which refers to a process of rapid responsiveness and dialogical connectedness. An interlocutor re-negotiates the dialogue by contextualizing it and providing access to it for a wider, interdependent public. For instance, using the previous example, in the connector role, a college student uploads a news item about a migrant worker’s death, and in the role of the interlocutor, diverse media nodes, including news agencies, officials, independent journalists may respond to it and engage in dialogue about it through their preferred platforms, which might create a short-term, case-based public sphere. Through an interlocutor’s attention and reinterpretation, news and issues are likely to be discussed by wider and interdependent connectors. The interactions between connectors and interlocutors can lead to some topics becoming more prominent, and the content and narrative of such interactions can go back to the actor dimension, even affecting the actor’s information agenda in some circumstances. From this perspective, the notion of opinion leaders could be employed here to help better understand the interlocutor dimension, because its key idea is to emphasize that media messages are further mediated and interpreted by a small group of ‘influentials’ and then diffused to the broader audiences, in both the mass media era and the digital spheres (e.g., Dubois & Gaffney, 2014; Weeks et al., 2017; Karlsen, 2015).

In this flow of process-oriented information, the actor, connector and interlocutor roles played by various media participants are multiple, overlapping, and sometimes transferable across

different stages of communication. Volkmer (2014) emphasized inclusion rather than exclusion among different information providers and consumers. Her model serves as a way to make these diverse roles visible within the communicative sphere of public interdependence, and allows for an integration of the connecting relations of public discourse across the world. This study elucidates the roles different contexts have played in configuring the communication space in various societies. Through employing three sets of analytical dimensions, this thesis uses a typological approach to contextualize national political communication spaces.

2.5 The Analytical Dimensions of ‘Actor, Connector and Interlocutor’

Because of their great conceptual power, typological approaches have a long history of use in the social sciences (such as in communication studies, sociology and political science), with many previous studies establishing types and classifications to organize the complex relationships between social phenomena and assign single cases to groups that share similar characteristics (Büchel et al., 2016; Hallin & Mancini, 2017). For instance, in Esping-Anderson’s (1990) classification of welfare state regimes, countries’ regimes were grouped as either liberal, conservative, or social democratic, and Ferree et al.’s (2002a) work proposed three types of public spheres comprising liberal representative (liberal elite), participatory liberal (republican), and discursive (deliberative) public spheres. The typology most relevant to this study is Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) book-length analysis of three models of national media systems, involving the North Atlantic ‘liberal’ model, the northern European ‘democratic corporatist’ model, and the southern European ‘polarized pluralist’ model. Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) ‘three models’ were a major breakthrough in comparative political communication research, though their approach was also criticized for not taking into account the changing digital media ecology and the role of global communication flows beyond the nation state. This thesis, by focusing on the political information flow in digital spheres and undertaking a detailed explication of the primary role of the national communication sphere in wider regional and global spaces, helps to overcome these shortcomings.

This chapter puts forward a set of three distinct models as its key conceptual apparatus for two reasons. First, establishing types and typologies makes it possible to associate individual cases with general and systematic patterns of political communication spaces (Hallin & Mancini, 2017). While some research investigating the political information flow in various

contexts has tended to provide path-dependent and idiosyncratic explanations for the characteristics and phenomena found in that context, this research aims to identify similar patterns across a number of cases, and in this way conceptualizes and explains them more systematically. Secondly, and more importantly, the typology and contextualization employed in this study describe the empirical reality of interactions and power relations between diverse communicative participants that vary significantly between different cultures and systems, rather than denoting an ideal or normatively desirable model of political communication spheres which are based on the Western perspective of ‘democratic communication’. Many comparative analyses have imposed Western notions, such as mass deliberation and the public sphere, on research of the global South, comparing their presences and configurations in these societies with the Western world and evaluating the liberating potential of digital technology in emerging democracies, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian nations (e.g., Jackson & Wang, 2013; Harlow & Harp, 2012; He, 2014). Because these analyses often suppose that a free media environment, a high ICT penetration rate, in parallel with a politically-interested and information-armed mass public, will jointly represent the forward direction of political communication in non-Western nations, they tend to view the current configurations and features of political communication spaces in these contexts as a transitory phase. However, just as Voltmer’s (2011) insights pointed out that hybrid regimes exhibit a surprising level of persistence, rather than simply being a transitory stage in a country’s journey from autocratic to democratic rule, this thesis contends that the political communication sphere in countries outside the affluent, democratic Western world will also be able to maintain their current operational mechanisms and internal logics for a considerable time and, therefore, it is worthwhile identifying their specific types.

Case Selection

Like many other contextualization studies in comparative political communication research, this thesis adopted the ‘most different system design’ (Teune & Przeworski, 1970) and selected 21 nations to compare and categorize national communication spaces, based on the accessibility of data (Wirth & Kolb, 2004). The sample comprised Angola, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Colombia, Ethiopia, France, Germany, Japan, Malaysia, Niger, Norway, Poland, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Spain, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

The selection of reliable, applicable and representative indicators is crucial to establish types

and typologies. For instance, Hallin and Mancini (2004) developed four sets of indicators, involving the structure of media markets, the role of the state, political parallelism, and journalistic professionalism, which together provide a useful intellectual toolkit for understanding the immense variations between systems of public communication in different contexts. While Hallin and Mancini's (2004) work mostly focused on national media systems in the mass media era, the present thesis offers some alternative methodological measurements that could be used to categorize political information flow in digital spheres. It considers three sets of analytical dimensions and indicators that determine the typology of national political communication spaces, namely, the degrees of media development, communication freedom, and societal supportiveness.

Analytical Dimensions and Indicators: Media Development, Communication Freedom and Societal Supportiveness

The degree of media development was used as the first analytical dimension and indicator to determine the richness and diversity of communicative participants in a national communication space. In other words, this indicator determined the size and activity level of national political communication spaces. This thesis considered media development from the two aspects of digital communication and mass media. The digital communication role was measured using the ICT Development Index (IDI) (International Telecommunication Union (ITU), 2016), which illustrates the degree of ICT development in economies across the world. It includes measurements of access sub-index and use sub-index, providing scores from 1-10 (with Niger receiving the lowest score of 1.07, and South Korea the highest score of 8.84), and the IDI rankings for each economy. This study drew upon the ITU's categorization, whereby economies that scored above 6.94 were viewed as having a 'high degree of IDI values', those that scored between 5.04 and 6.90 as having an 'upper-middle degree of IDI values', those that scored between 2.88 and 5.03 as having a 'lower-middle degree of IDI values', and those that scored between 1.07 and 2.86 as having 'low degree of IDI values' (IDI, 2016).

In addition to digital communication, this study also took mass media development into account. Previous studies argue that the traditional mass media and journalists have played crucial roles in producing news, gatekeeping, sense-making, and fact-checking within the networked political communication sphere (e.g., Castells, 2011; Segev, 2017). Therefore, the degree of mass media prosperity has significantly contributed to the configuration of national

political communication spaces. In a mass media-rich society, traditional news institutions (like the press and television) have actively moved to online platforms and integrated user-generated content with their daily operation, therefore helping them to form a fully-fledged, multi-actor communication network (Castells, 2011). In a nation with a weak mass media industry, the absence of a well-established media authority and the sudden entrance of networked communication spaces might lead to abundant fake news and rumours. The role of mass media prosperity was measured by the daily newspaper circulation per 1,000 people from data drawn from EconStats (2017). Daily newspaper circulation has been considered an important and representative indicator for measuring the development of the national media market, which was adopted by a lot of research on communication scholarship (e.g., De Mooij, 2003; Franklin, 2008; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). However, until now, there has not been clear-cut criterion regarding the high or low degree of daily newspaper circulation. Therefore, this thesis adopted a rough categorization with regards to this indicator, like many previous studies have (e.g., Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002). Since the world average newspaper circulation per 1,000 people in 2017 was 104.63, this thesis viewed nations with average daily circulation rates above 150 as having a ‘high’ degree of media prosperity, whereas those with daily newspaper circulation rates between 50 and 149 were viewed as having a ‘medium’ degree, and those with a circulation rate below 50 were seen as having a ‘low’ degree of media prosperity.

The second analytical dimension and indicator of the degree of communication freedom largely forms the internal logics and norms among diverse participants in national political communication spheres—the power relations between actors, connectors and interlocutors. In countries having a high level of communication freedom, the state seldom interferes in the process of information flow and therefore, in such contexts, various communicative participants have more opportunities to engage in political communication spaces that are relatively symmetrical. On the other hand, in societies where there is less communication freedom, the processes of news production and dissemination have been usually impacted by government censorship, and the right of reporting significant political issues is often granted to several exclusive groups, such as state-owned media agencies.

The degree of communication freedom was measured by the reports of the Freedom of the Press and Freedom of the Internet (Freedom House, 2017). Although a few studies have criticized the Freedom House for rating the U.S.’ allies as more democratic (e.g., Mainwaring

et al., 2001), the Freedom House's annual report has been widely recognized as reflecting the democratic level of economies in a reliable and systematic way (Williams, 2015). Moreover, Steiner's (2016) research found that since 1988, the Freedom House's report has shown to be obviously less politically biased than during the Cold War. Therefore, this thesis adopts the annual report from the Freedom House to measure communication freedom of the chosen nations. In the two measurements of Freedom of the Press and Freedom of the Internet, each nation receives a score ranging from 0 (most free) to 100 (least free), and are categorized accordingly into one of the three types: 'free', 'partly free', or 'not free'. This study drew upon the ITU's categorization, whereby nations that scored between 0 and 30 were viewed as 'free' and having a high degree of communication freedom, those that scored between 31 and 60 were viewed as 'partly free' and having a medium degree of communication freedom, and those that scored between 61 and 100 were viewed as 'not free' and having a low degree of communication freedom.

The third analytical dimension and indicator of societal supportiveness affects the operational efficiency of a national communication space, and it comprises the two roles of economic and educational development levels. Economic supportiveness was measured by GDP per capita based on purchasing power parity (PPP) (International Monetary Fund, 2017), and the educational development level was measured by the expected years of schooling (of children) (Human Development Report, 2013). Both of these two indicators have been widely used in political economic studies and comparative analysis to measure social development (see for instances, Hanushek & Kimko, 2000; Sung, 2004; Taylor & Taylor, 2004). This thesis considered economic and educational development levels as two key indicators of societal supportiveness which influence the national political communication space because the former reflects a nation's macro-economic development, which affects a nation's capability in building telecommunication infrastructure and its people's purchasing power to consume communicative applications (e.g., TV, mobile phone, and personal computer), while the latter reflects individuals' ability (because of their level of digital literacy and related skills) to engage in political discussion in digital spheres. For the economic supportiveness indicator of GDP based on PPP, this study distinguished three degrees: high (25,000 or more international dollars per capita), medium (5,000 to 25,000 international dollars per capita), and low degrees (under 5,000 international dollars per capita). For the educational supportiveness indicator, this study drew on the categorization of the Human Development Report (UNESCO, 2013), which defined expected years of schooling above 13.4 years as high, between 11.7 and 13.4

years as medium, and below 11.7 years as low. Based on characteristic constellations of media, political and societal variables, this study deduced and conceptualized three models of national political communication space worldwide.

2.6 Contextualizing National Political Communication Spaces

Drawing upon the aforementioned analytical dimensions, this chapter contextualizes Volkmer's (2014) model of 'actor, connector and interlocutor' by proposing three types of national political communication spaces, namely 'symmetrical and fully-fledged', 'vigorous but censored', and 'infertile and unresponsive'. This is the main theoretical contribution of this thesis. The following section analyses these three communication spaces according to four aspects: their characteristics, the interactions between 'actors, connectors and interlocutors', their linkages to other communicative spheres, and their distribution across the globe. The summarized analyses and explanations are shown in Table 2.1. Indicators and scores for each of the 21 sampled nations are shown in Table 2.2 according to each type. To avoid being rigid in defining boundaries, scatter plots of the identified types of selected countries which helped to demonstrate the internal differentiations within the same category are shown in Figure 2.1.

Table 2.1. Summaries of typology of national, political communication space

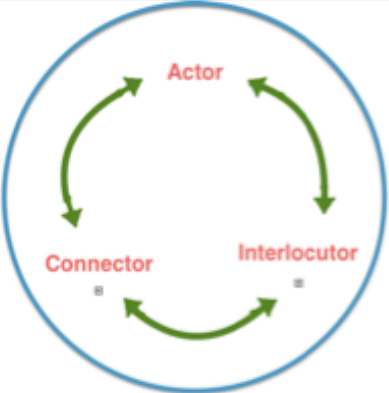
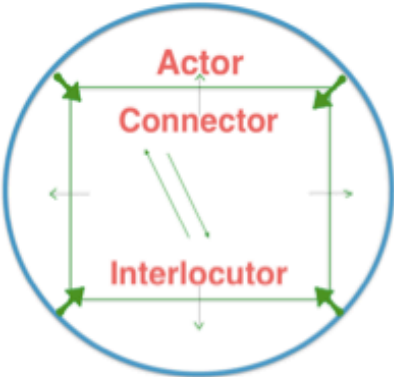
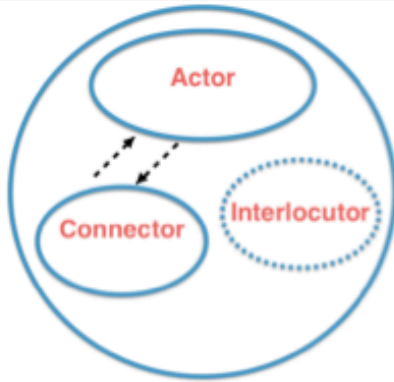
	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3
Characteristics	Symmetrical and fully-fledged	Vigorous but censored	Infertile and unresponsive
Indicators	High: media development High: communication freedom High: societal and economic supportiveness	Medium to high: media development Medium to low: communication freedom Medium: societal and economic supportiveness	Low: media development Medium to low: communication freedom Low: societal and economic supportiveness
The Interactions between actors, connectors and interlocutors			
The distribution and representative cases	West, North, South Europe; North America; Australia and New Zealand; Some parts in East Asia. Case: US, UK, Canada, Germany, Norway, Japan, Australia, France, Spain	Majority nations in Asia, Latin America, Eurasia, East Europe, and Middle East. Case: Russia, China, Malaysia, Brazil, Colombia, Poland, Turkey	Sub-Sahara Africa Case: Ethiopia, Niger, Angola
Linkage to other	High degree	Medium to high degree but context-	Low degree

Table 2. 2. Indicators of selected samples, according to each type of political communication space

Indicators Nations	The degree of media development		The degree of communication freedom		The degree of societal supportiveness	
	Newspaper circulation per 1,000 population	IDI value	Press freedom	Internet freedom	GDP per capital based on PPP (thousand dollars)	Expected years of schooling
Type 1: Symmetrical and fully-fledged space						
Australia	155	8.19	22	21	49.88	19.9
Canada	174	7.62	18	16	48.14	15.9
France	163	8.11	26	25	43.55	16.0
Germany	267	8.31	20	19	50.21	16.3
Japan	551	8.37	27	22	42.66	15.3
Norway	516	8.42	8	7	70.59	17.6
Spain	144	7.62	28	25	38.17	17.1
UK	289	8.57	25	23	43.62	16.2
U.S.	193	8.17	23	18	59.5	16.5
Type 2: Vigorous but censored space						
Brazil	35	5.99	47	32	15.5	15.2
China	74	5.19	87	88	16.62	12.9
Colombia	22	5.16	57	32	14.45	13.2
Malaysia	109	6.22	69	45	28.87	12.7
Poland	113	6.65	53	38	29.25	15.5
Russia	91	6.95	83	65	27.9	14.0
Saudi Arabia	No data	6.9	86	72	55.26	15.6
Singapore	360	7.95	67	41	90.53	15.4
Turkey	No data	5.69	76	61	26.45	14.4
Type 3: Infertile and unresponsive space						
Angola	2.23	2.03	74	40	6.81	11.4
Ethiopia	4.64	1.51	86	83	2.11	8.5
Niger	0.19	1.07	52	No data	1.15	5.4

2.6.1 Type 1 National Political Communication Space: Symmetrical and Fully-Fledged

This thesis proposes that the political communication space in nations having a high degree of media development (well-established mass media market and high penetration of digital communication technology), a high degree of communication freedom (minimum state censorship of political information flow), and a high degree of societal supportiveness (high levels of economic development and public education) can be categorized as Type 1, symmetrical and fully-fledged space.

Characteristics. The feature of symmetry does not imply that such spaces exhibit an absolute equality of communication power among various media participants, but rather refers to the relatively equal opportunities, capabilities and rights that exist between these participants—factors that allow them to enter the communication space, obtain and deliver information, express themselves, and communicate with others. A democratic and stable political system is the foundation of a symmetrical communication space because democratic governments can usually guarantee communicative freedom, and rarely exercise censorship in the media field. The other characteristic is the ‘fully-fledged’ nature of this communication, which refers to three criteria. First, such spaces should contain a well-established media system, in which traditional linear media converge with digital media to create a multi-platform media environment. Second, they should boast well-constructed telecommunication infrastructure, granting media participants easy and low-cost access to communication spaces. Third, the majority of social members in this space should have a high level of education, literacy, and digital literacy skills so that digital barriers are minimized.

The interactions between the actors, connectors and interlocutors. The interactions among diverse media participants in a symmetrical and fully-fledged communication space can be considered closest to Volkmer’s (2014) original framework. Media participants variously play the role of the ‘actor’ in providing original information and content, the ‘connector’ in raising issues and promoting wider discussion, and the ‘interlocutor’ in dialogically responding to, and connecting with, other participants in different circumstances. The political authorities’ influence can be observed in this type of communication space through political parallelism and media partisanship, or through the ‘rally around the flag effect’ (Mueller, 1970), as seen during war and conflict. Also, news agencies and journalists play a role in ‘sense-making’. However, this type of communication space does not lead to specific communicative roles

being limited to any advantageous group. Network-connectedness replaces hierarchy, and represents the fundamental logic supporting interactions between the actors, connectors, and interlocutors in the symmetrical and fully-fledged space.

The distribution. Considering the ‘triple-high’ features of Type 1 communication spaces (their high degrees of media development, communication freedom, and societal supportiveness), this thesis suggests that the communication spaces in developed democracies could be generally categorized into this type, covering societies in most parts of the West, North, and South Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, and some parts of East Asia. Representative cases are the U.S., UK, Germany, Canada, France, Australia, Japan, Norway, and Spain. However, this does not imply that the communication spaces in these Type 1 nations are uniformly the same. Despite sharing two fundamental similarities—their highly being symmetrical and fully-fledged—communication spaces in Western contexts display heterogeneity in terms of political parallelism, the degree of state intervention, and the media traditions of the public service model as compared to a market-dominated model. For instance, Northern European countries have a tradition of state intervention in defending the ideological plurality of the media, and a public service model of broadcasting, labeled by Hallin and Mancini (2004) as the ‘democratic corporatist model’; these characteristics are likely to be validated in the digitally networked communication space.

Linkage to other communication spaces. The symmetrical and fully-fledged communication space reflects a high degree of linkage to other national, regional, transnational and global communication spaces. Geographical, political, cultural, and linguistic proximities also help to connect national communication spaces in Western societies with each other, integrating them into robust, transnational communication spheres such as the ‘European sphere’, the ‘North American sphere’, or the wider ‘Western sphere’. Simultaneously, the democratized systems in the countries with these spheres guarantee, to a large extent, that information flow remains unfiltered and unblocked within and between communication spaces.

2.6.2 Type 2 National Political Communication Space: Vigorous but Censored

This thesis proposes that the political communication spaces in nations which have a medium to high degree of media development (having a certain number of established, national mass media outlets and explosive numbers of Internet users), a medium to low degree of

communication freedom, and a medium degree of societal supportiveness can be categorized as Type 2, vigorous but censored spaces.

The characteristics. As its name implies, this type of communication space is characterized by two contrasting features, the first related to energetic developments in the field of media and communication, and the second to a media environment in which the political authorities consistently or occasionally exercise censorship or other forms of surveillance. A communication space can be defined as ‘vigorous’ when it meets two criteria: first, when its telecommunication infrastructure has rapidly developed due to increasing numbers of fixed and mobile-cellular telephone subscriptions and growing internet bandwidth (i.e., when each approaches the global average); and second, when a considerable number of its social members have embraced media digitalization and networked communication by actively engaging in this space. It should be noted that the definition of a ‘vigorous communication space’ implies two facts. First, it implies that such a communication space was previously ‘unvigorous’ or ‘inanimate’, but was later revitalized by digitally networked communication. Therefore, the communication spaces of most Western societies have not been classified as belonging to this type, but rather as Type 1—the ‘symmetric and fully-fledged space’—since they have shown robustness with respect to diverse media participants’ cooperation and competition in the mass media era.) Second, the definition of a Type 2 communication space implies that its communication infrastructure is still yet to mature. That is, it has grown rapidly over the past decade with the involvement of a large number of participants but the mechanisms and logic through which this communication space operated are flawed in some ways. To name but one, this kind of communication space suffers from the serious shortcoming of being under constant governmental censorship.

As mentioned, the second feature of this Type 2 communication space concerns an environment of surveillance in which the media operates, and in which the political authorities consistently or occasionally exercise censorship. In societies boasting a ‘vigorous but censored communication space’, linear media have usually served as political tools of the state. In the newly formed communication space, the traditional state-sponsored media elites and organizations have sought to maintain their dominant position and discursive power through propagating the official ideology, policies and viewpoints. Despite digital communication technologies having transformed the previously passive information-receiver

dynamic to one involving subjective information producers and disseminators, the rights and practices of emerging and ordinary media participants have been significantly limited with respect to communicating certain issues—especially political ones.

The interactions between the actors, connectors and interlocutors. A vigorous but censored communication space implies a hierarchy of power. This hierarchical structure is often invisible when dealing with relatively innocuous issues, such as entertainment and sports, but becomes more obvious when communicating sensitive issues, such as those related to politics. In regard to communicating significant political issues, the more powerful media participants—usually the state and official media—have operated as monopolistic actors in the communication space by delimiting its boundaries, setting key themes, and deciding when debates are opened and closed. Other media participants have played the roles of connector and interlocutor by raising, discussing, and engaging in problems within the controlled and strictly censored communication space. Meanwhile, a vigorous but censored communication space is also contentious. Because the social members in this communication space are vigorous in terms of actively engagement, they are not likely to be satisfied or comfortable with being limited to operating within pre-set boundaries and themes, and thus continuously seek to challenge them. The outcomes of the competition and struggles between the dominant actor and ordinary connectors and interlocutors are uncertain and dependent on many variables, including the power of the political authority and the social culture.

The distribution. Generally, vigorous but censored communication spaces are located within societies where democracy has not been fully realized, and where both the macro-economy and ICT have rapidly developed in recent past decades. Despite being characterized as ‘censored’, this type of communication space has spread more widely than in authoritarian nations (or closed regimes) alone, being found in a range of nations across Asia, Latin America, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe in which multi-party elections exist, though they are undemocratic. A highly relevant concept here is that of ‘competitive authoritarianism’ put forward by Levitsky and Way (2010). They suggested that the diffusion of multiparty elections does not necessarily entail democracy. Where favourable domestic conditions (such as a strong civil society and effective state institutions) are absent, democratic transitions are more likely to result in regimes that combine multi-party elections with some form of authoritarian rule, leading to the description of ‘competitive authoritarianism’. In these

nations, unfair media access and regular censorship are obvious features that have existed in parallel with electoral manipulation and the abuse of state resources (Levisky & Way, 2010).

Combining an analysis of the worldwide, dramatic development of ICTs over the past few decades, especially in the global South, with the concept of ‘competitive authoritarianism’, which describes the sort of political system found in most non-Western societies, this study argues that a vigorous but censored space is the most widespread communication space in the world, being found in a majority of countries in Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, Eastern Europe and former Soviet nations. Some representative cases are Brazil, China, Colombia, Malaysia, Poland, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and Turkey.

Linkage to other communication spaces. The vigorous but censored communication space is by and large open to the outside world, and experiences only occasional closures during significant political crises. Compared with the symmetrical and fully-fledged space, language barriers and the state’s blockage (temporarily or permanently) of several Western media platforms emerge as two hindering factors. Generally, this type of communication space has a medium to high degree of linkage to transnational and global communicative spheres, but has been context-dependent. For instance, communication spaces in many Southeast Asian nations have displayed very strong linkages to the global sphere, with more than 80% of Internet users in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines having an active profile on Facebook through which they can communicate to the outside world in fluent English (Lee, 2017). However, their Asian neighbour, China, boasts one of the world’s most complicated and successful censorship mechanisms and, therefore, its political communication space has reflected only a medium to low level of linkage to the outside world.

2.6.3 Type 3 National Political Communication Space: Infertile and Unresponsive

This thesis proposes that the political communication space in nations that have a low degree of media development, a medium to low degree of communication freedom, and a low degree of societal supportiveness can be classified as Type 3, infertile and unresponsive space.

Characteristics. The Type 3, infertile and unresponsive communication space is characterized by media scarceness and under-development. For the majority of the world’s nations, state-owned media organizations play a crucial role in their communication spaces, regardless

of whether they have been significantly weakened or enhanced by the presence of digital technology and a networked structure. Commercial media are also key players in this communication space, and have adapted themselves to the digital ecology and provide more services embedded in digital platforms and applications. However, in the Type 3 communication space, these established and essential media participants are also seriously under-developed and under-functioning. According to an indicator of newspaper circulation, for instance, newspaper sales in most Sub-Saharan countries has been less than 5 copies per 1,000 people—significantly lower than the world’s average of 104 copies. The characteristic of ‘infertility’ also refers to the significantly lower engagement of the public in the communication space, largely because of the poor construction of telecommunication infrastructure, as well as the low level of education, literacy, and digital skills possessed by the majority of their population. Also, in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, despite the increased penetration of mobile phones over the past years, the percentage of the population that uses the Internet has been lower than 10%—significantly lower than the world’s average of 50.6% (International Telecommunication Union, 2016). Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect a robust communication space to emerge where only a few social members are active in it.

The second feature of the Type 3 communication space is unresponsiveness. A well-organized communication space usually requires responsiveness through participants’ voices and requests being heard. In addition, some issues, because of their significance or popularity, can be sent to more powerful and influential media participants who in turn respond. The interactions between ordinary media participants and political, media, or social elites break down the previous information and communication hierarchies, making this communication space robustly ‘networked’. However, due to the absence of media elites, dialogical responses and connectedness in the Type 3 infertile and unresponsive space are significantly absent compared to communication spaces Types 1 and 2. This kind of communication space displays unresponsiveness such that media participants, even if they can express their concerns or thoughts, cannot expect effective, authoritative feedback or solutions. To sum up, such media scarceness and unresponsiveness seriously undermine the robustness and effectiveness of this type of political communication space.

Interactions between the actor, connector and interlocutor. In the infertile and unresponsive

communication space, national and international news agencies, NGOs, the public, and social media can play the roles of the actor and connector, but the interlocutor role is usually much less prominent because effective dialogical responsiveness is lacking. Furthermore, interactions between the actor and connector are much weaker here than in the other two types of communication space.

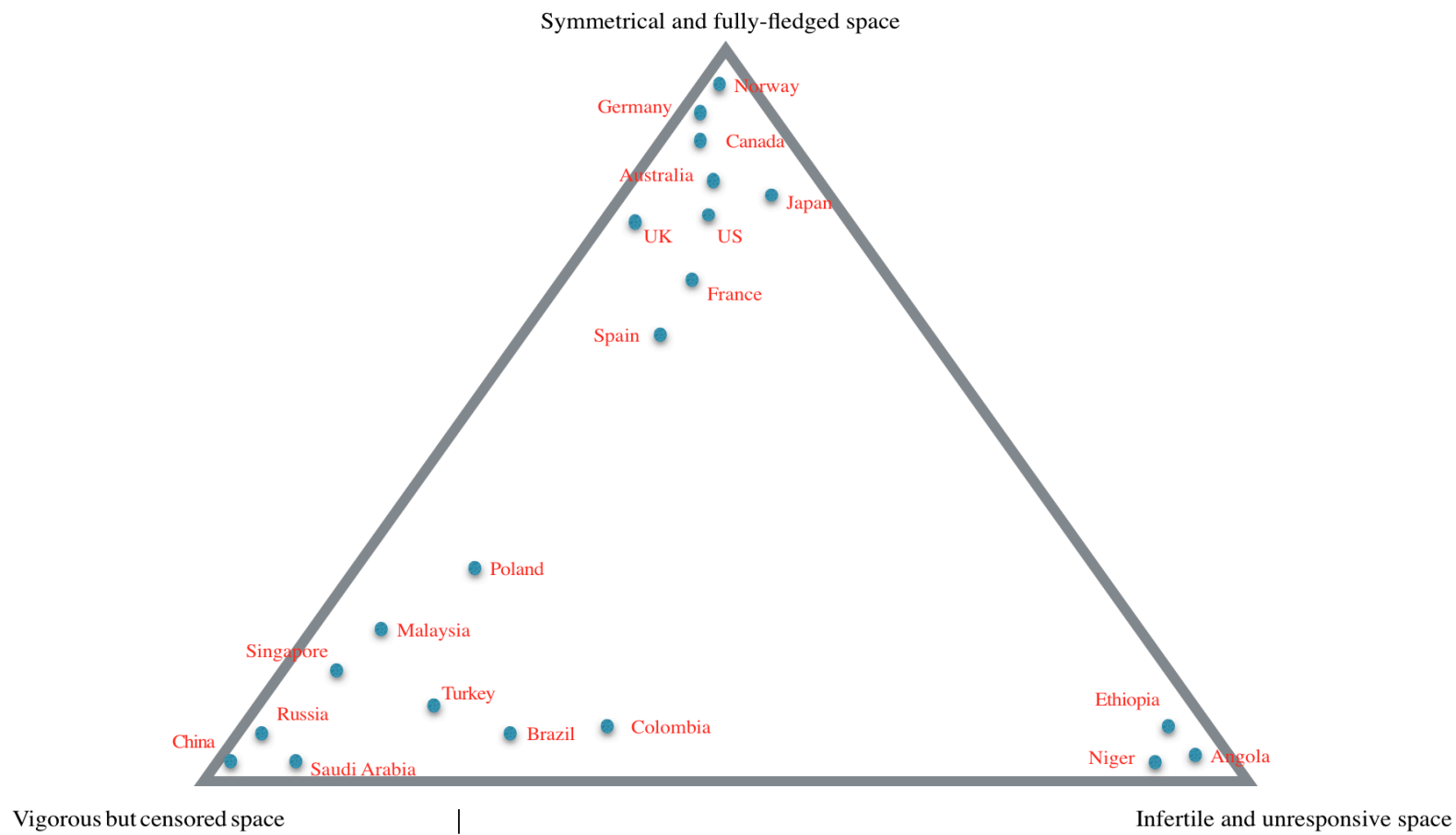
The distribution. Considering the ‘triple-low’ features of a low degree of media development (in spite of their recent increase in internet users), a low to medium degree of communication freedom, and a low level of societal supportiveness, this thesis suggests that the majority of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa could be categorized as belonging to this Type 3 communication space, alongside a few nations in Asia suffering from extreme poverty. Representative cases include Ethiopia, Niger, and Angola (see Table 2.2).

Linkage to other communication space. In the infertile and unresponsive communication space, the linkage to other transnational, regional, and global communication spaces is low, with the main reasons being their low level of Internet penetration, poor connectedness, and low levels of individual literacy and digital skills. Language is also a barrier here. Although Indo-European languages are used as the official languages in Sub-Saharan Africa, in the majority of the population in this region, Niger-Congo languages such as Bantu are more widely spoken, and this hinders linkage to transnational and global spheres in this type of communication space.

To conclude, in the ‘symmetrical and fully-fledged’ space, various media participants cooperate and strengthen each other, and the power relations among them reflect a relatively balanced trajectory. The ‘vigorous but censored space’ exhibits conflict, repression, and compromise between existing political and media elites, on the one hand, and emerging communicative participants on the other. Despite displaying different configurations, in these two types of communication space various media participants have defined roles and exercise their functions. However, the most distinctive characteristic of the ‘infertile and unresponsive space’ is its apparent lack of communicative elements, such as media content, platforms, and participants, followed by the ineffective interaction that occurs between the communicators. Although this study established a typology to organize a large number of diverse observations, there are potential risks of conducting a typology, for example, its possible rigidity in defining

boundaries between types and neglecting the internal heterogeneity within them. To avoid such risks, this thesis presents scatter plots of the identified types of selected countries from across the globe to demonstrate the internal differentiations within them (see Figure 2.1).

Drawing upon this typology, the last section of this chapter (Section 2.7) focuses on the (Type 2) ‘vigorous but censored communication space’ and applies this research model to examine political communication arrangement in the contemporary Chinese context. It defines the roles of the actor, connector, and interlocutor played by various communicative participants and proposes the power relations among them. By doing so, Section 2.7 explores the complicated, multifaceted, ever-changing, and sometimes paradoxical interconnections among various media participants in China’s political communication space—all of which have operated under the globally similar logic of networked connectedness, but have been strongly influenced by China’s discretely political, economic, cultural, and societal trajectories.



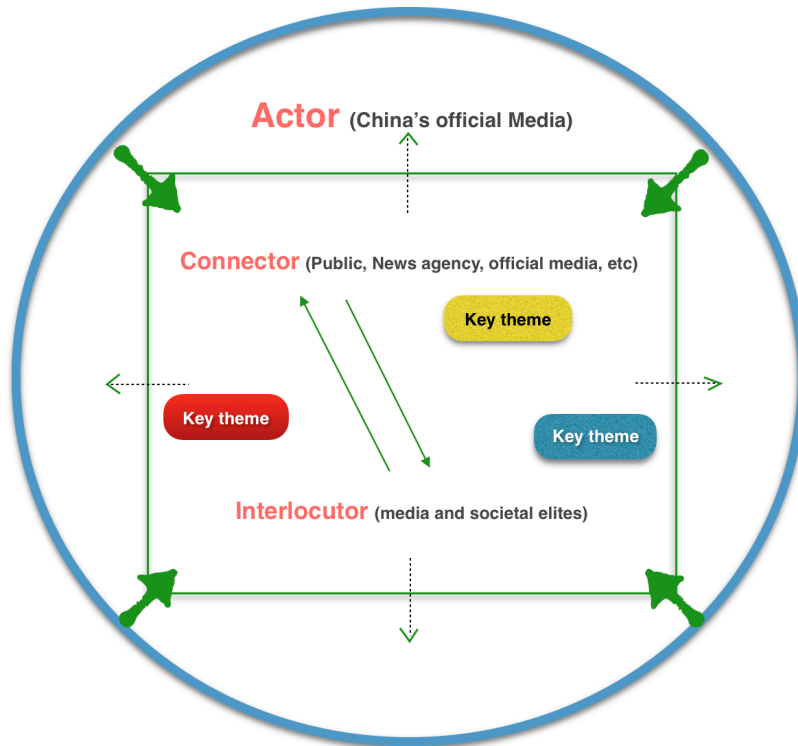
2.7 Applying the Perspective of a ‘Vigorous but Censored Space’ to the Chinese Context: Who are the Actors, Connectors and Interlocutors?

According to the indicators and measurements that this thesis proposed, China’s political communication sphere was classified as a Type 2, vigorous but censored space, with its medium degree of media development, very low degree of communication freedom, and medium degree of societal supportiveness. This thesis suggests that the vigorous and censored nature of China’s political communication space has been strongly representative of this type.

The flourishing and robustness of China’s communication space have been widely recognized in both academic and political circles (e.g., Chen & Reese, 2015; Hadland, 2015; Li et al., 2016; Shirk, 2011; Yang, 2003, 2009; Zhao, 2008, 2012). According to the latest report of the China Internet Network Information Center, as of mid-2017, the number of Internet users in China had risen to 751 million, exceeding the whole population of Europe, (CNNIC, 2017). With the world’s highest online population and booming market, China’s digital industry, although a late starter, has been swiftly catching up on the information highway (Creemers, 2017; Lagerkvist, 2012). It was not long ago that China’s Internet and technology companies were dismissed as ‘marginal’ firms with a tendency to copy Western products (The Economist, 2017). But now, they are non-negligible and increasingly ambitious forces that are achieving domestic and international success in a global digital market. For example, the gross merchandise volume (GMV) of Alibaba, China’s largest e-commerce group, was US \$547 billion in the 2017 fiscal year—more than eBay and Amazon combined (Alibaba Group, 2017). Tencent, which specializes in online games and social media, is now the world’s 10th most valuable public firm, being worth more than US \$275 billion in 2017 (Fortune, 2017). Huawei, China’s leading smartphone maker, has surpassed Apple as the world’s second largest cell phone brand, and it, along with other Chinese brands of Xiaomi, Oppo and Vivo, hold a record 48% market share worldwide in 2016 (International Data Corporation, 2017).

Nevertheless, the vigorousness of China’s communication sphere, which has resulted from the overwhelming trends of media marketization, digitalization and globalization, has not overall weakened the Chinese State’s decade-long capability of exercising censorship over society (Song & Chang, 2016; Tai, 2014; Wu, 2005; Zhou, 2017). Rather, the Chinese government has kept pace with the times, actively adopting digital technologies to update, consummate, and complicate its means of mass surveillance, manipulating information, guiding opinion, and controlling the news. For example, on 13 July, 2017, Liu Xiaobo, a Chinese Nobel Peace

prize laureate and democracy activist, died of liver cancer. Just a few hours after his death, almost all news and content related to Liu's life and death were erased from Sina Weibo, China's most influential social networking site (the New York Times, 2017). Whatever details remained on the Chinese Internet about Liu were uniform and one-sided, reflecting the official views of the Chinese state, such as the criticism that Liu had made a deal with 'Western subversive forces' to undermine his motherland. Three months after Liu's death in October 2017, Chinese netizens witnessed even larger-scale Internet censorship following the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CCP). Because this political summit (which takes place every five years and includes the selection of central party leadership) is hugely influential, it is also a time when Chinese censors are on high alert. Before and during the Congress, both WeChat (China's most popular messaging app) and Sina Weibo prevented their users from discussing sensitive political issues, spreading alternative news, and even changing their users' nicknames or profile photos (South China Morning Post, 2017). Within this highly monitored media environment, Internet and social media users were only allowed to disseminate political news that was strictly consistent with the official position—applauding the profound achievements that China made during the General Secretary Xi Jinping's first presidential term (2012-2017). Due to China's successful experiences in domestic information governance, some authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes, such as those of Zimbabwe and Ethiopia, have imported China's cyberspace censorship equipment and personnel to strengthen their capability of communication control (Gumede, 2016). Therefore, this thesis argues that China serves as an appropriate context for examining the 'vigorous but censored space', and also suggests that this typology and research model of the 'actor, connector and interlocutor' provides a dynamic framework to explore the interactions between diverse participants in China's media space.



The interactions between media participants in China's political communication space

Figure 2.2. The interactions between the roles of actor, connector and interlocutor in China's communication space.

Figure 2.2 illustrates the process of information flow involving the interplay among the actors, connectors and interlocutors in China's vigorous but censored communication space. In China's political communication space, the first role is that of the actor, which refers to the original source(s) of information and media content (Volkmer, 2014). According to Volkmer (2014), in an age in which public communication takes place within an open, infinite network, there is almost no restriction on the media forms of the actor as long as information can enter the communicative network. However, this thesis suggests that in a vigorous but censored space, the more powerful media participants—usually the State and official media—have operated as monopolistic actors in regards to political issues. In this sense, China is not an exception. A significant feature of China's political communication space has been the actor dimension, which has ostensibly been an open dimension. Throughout the Mao and post-Mao era, China's Party organs played the role of communication actor monopolistically in almost every aspect of political and social life. It is likely that the development of digital media technologies in parallel with the transformations affecting the socioeconomic context in China have significantly expanded and diversified the scope of the communication actor. More

recently, the traditional party organs have ceased to be the exclusive actors in many fields, including educational, environmental, and economic issues. Even in the political arena, the central government has appeared more lenient, as witnessed by the publication of reports about the corruption and misbehaviour of a number of officials on the Internet and social media of (Lin, 2015; Tang & Sampson, 2012; Tong, 2015). However, this thesis contends that the openness of the actor dimension is conditional, and can easily be withdrawn. Numerous cases have shown that China's official media have functioned as monopolistic actors in China's political communication space when dealing with issues related to foreign relations, ethnic affairs, and territorial affairs, as well as emergent public events (cases include Sino-Japanese disputes, the Wenzhou train collision, SARS, and Songhua River pollution incident, to name just a few). More specifically, this monopolistic position has usually embodied two aspects of China's communication space, namely, delimiting its boundaries and setting its key themes.

The connector dimension involves various media participants who take part in producing, consuming, and disseminating content and engaging in public debate. Information technologies and digital communication applications provide the platforms for this dimension and enable a previously passive audience to subjectively and reflectively deliberate with each other, and in this way become 'connectors'. In the mass media era, political deliberation was, to a large extent, absent in China because the public followed the official narratives unquestioningly. However, over the past two decades, digitally networked communications have exposed the Chinese public to an unprecedentedly abundant amount of information and alternative viewpoints, complementing, reinforcing and challenging the normative discourses (Chen & Reese, 2015; Denmark & Chunn, 2016; Medaglia & Yang, 2017). These diversified, competing, contested, and even oppositional discourses have significantly promoted public deliberation, as well as facilitated and expanded the formation of 'connectors' within China's political communication space. In China, the public includes the largest numbers of connectors, but size is not necessarily equal to power or influence in this dimension. The traditional news providers, namely news agencies, have also played the connector role and have taken advantage of their own news gathering and editing functions to expand their influence in China's communication space. NGOs, independent journalists, and the State alike could be understood as connectors because they have all actively engaged in this process. Compared with the 'actor' dimension, which is generally undertaken by a few exclusive players, the 'connector' dimension has rather embodied the characteristic of inclusiveness,

playing a role that almost all media participants have adopted despite their power and influence being far from symmetrical. Through choice, discussion, and fermentation by the connectors, some topics have been raised while others have been discarded, and the raised topics may, in turn, have been selected and elaborated by interlocutors.

The interlocutor dimension is the third role in China's political communication space. This study claims that political, media and societal elites such as recognizable anchors or journalists, prominent scholars, artists, and celebrities often play the role of interlocutor. While Volkmer (2014) defined this dimension in terms of 'dialogical connectedness' and 'a process of rapid responsiveness', this study suggests that in China's communication space the interlocutor dimension is more like a 're-mediation' or 'negotiation' process which dialogically integrates the communication space, links actors to connectors, and guides public opinion through selecting, contextualizing and interpreting official's messages. Although the official media still monopolizes the original source of political news, especially with issues related to significant domestic matters and foreign relations, a majority of ordinary Chinese people expose such content not through directly accessing the official media's outlet but through digital-active and -influential interlocutors' selection, reposts and reinterpretation (Schneider, 2017; Svensson, 2014). While in the mass media era, Chinese public could rarely get politically alternative viewpoints, such as those from public intellectuals or overseas news organizations, until their discourses are reprinted by official media, nowadays they can directly and easily reach that information by "following" those media participants' social networking site's accounts. The networked communication logic has facilitated the rising of the influential interlocutors in China's media space. Through an interlocutor's attention and reinterpretation, news and issues are likely to be new and discussed by wider and interdependent connectors. The interactions between connectors and interlocutors can lead to some topics becoming more prominent, and the content and narrative of such interactions can go back to the actor dimension, even affecting the actor's information agenda under some circumstances.

Figure 2.2 shows several key features of China's political communication space. It first demonstrates that the previous top-down information propaganda has ceased to be the main story in China in the digital era since a subjectively and reflectively communicative sphere has emerged. The influence of globalisation and the diffusion of ICTs in parallel with China's drastic social changes have significantly transformed the Chinese media ecology from a linear,

top-down, ‘information transmission belt’ (Shambaugh, 2007) to a stereoscopic, dynamic, and network-connected communication space. Various media participants have taken on the roles of actor, connector and interlocutor, and have actively engaged in producing and consuming content, and disseminating and debating political topics. The interdependence and interactions between these media participants have made this communication space robustly networked. However, this space has by no means been a brand new and even playground for diverse participants. Established power relations, political systems, market mechanisms, and social and cultural traditions in the offline world have jointly formed the rules and logic of China’s digital spheres. Figure 2.2 also illustrates that China’s political communication space has been conditionally open, depending on the government’s attitudes and interests in regard to specific issues. The connectors and interlocutors have discussed issues and interacted with each other within a carefully delimited boundary that has been set by the actor. By inserting content and setting key themes, the actors have set the media agenda for China’s political communication space and, to a large extent, have avoided unexpected topics being raised by the connectors or interlocutors. Furthermore, the power relations between actors, connectors, and interlocutors have tended to be asymmetrical. While the influence of actors on connectors and interlocutors has been decisive, the opposite trend has been much weaker.

Conclusion

This chapter introduced the specific lens this thesis has adopted—digital-networked connectedness and the interactive axes of ‘actor, connector and interlocutor’, and explained its theoretical framework of the thesis—three types of networked, national political communication spheres. It connected digital communication research with comparative analysis, exploring the concurrence of global influence and national resilience in digital spheres. The key premise of this chapter (and of this thesis) is that the emergence of a global, network-connected political communication space does not necessarily entail the vanishing of national spaces. Rather, the social contexts of diverse nations are still significant in determining the specific configuration of political spaces and the operating logics between various communicative participants and processes (the actors, connectors and interlocutors).

By contextualizing Volkmer’s (2014) model, this chapter developed three sets of indicators to classify national political communication spaces into three distinctive types, namely, ‘symmetrical and fully-fledged’, ‘vigorous but censored’, and ‘infertile and unresponsive’. China’s political communication space, which is the research subject of this thesis, was

categorized as Type 2, ‘vigorous but censored space’ because of its dramatic media developments, robustness and flourishing over the past three decades on one hand, and its well-known censored environment, on the other. The specific characteristics, configurations, internal relations among the ‘actor’, ‘connector’ and ‘interlocutor’ of China’s vigorous but censored communication space were analysed in this chapter as well.

To be more specific, in the Chinese context, although news consumption, dissemination and reproduction in online space involve wide, diverse participants with a low-threshold of literacy and digital skills, the original source of political information which refers to the ‘actor’ dimension has been legally, exclusively granted to the official media by the Chinese state, especially issues related to foreign, ethnic, territory affairs, and emergent public events. Public discussion and deliberation represent the ‘connector’ dimension of China’s political communication space, in which masses of participants connected with each other by deliberating and engaging in the online discussion regarding political issues, and diverse viewpoints were formulated and debated. Information technologies and digital communication applications have provided platforms for this dimension and enabled previously passive audiences to subjectively and reflectively communicate with others, and therefore, become connectors. Furthermore, the interlocutor dimension referred to the re-mediation of political discourse and the integration of political communication space. This chapter proposed that political, media and social elites play the role of the interlocutor which dialogically integrates the communication space, links actors to connectors, and guides public opinion by selecting, contextualizing and interpreting officials’ messages.

In addition to serve as the theoretical framework of this thesis, the theorization and typology conducted in this chapter added the investigation on the ‘networked’ approach in media scholarship and comparative political communication research in two ways. First, by combing digital media research and comparative analysis, it is one of the first systematic analyses to explore the concurrence of global influence and national resilience in digital spheres, integrating the fundamentally homogeneous mechanism of network connectedness which has resulted from media globalization and digitalization with heterogeneous configurations of national, political communication spaces which are strongly influenced by enduring social contexts. This effort, to a large extent, can be seen as a refinement of Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) work, which is a central reference point in comparing media analysis, but has been criticized for not taking online environments into consideration. Second, this chapter

represents a de-Westernized effort by discarding the ‘normative approach’, which views the Western model as the ideal (forward) trajectory and model to be imitated by the rest of the world. The developed typology illuminates the complex and persistent realities of digital political communication processes in countries in the global South, which should not be viewed as simply occupying a transitory stage in their journey from autocratic to democratic rule, or from being a ‘developing’ to a ‘developed’ country. Rather, the political communication sphere in countries outside the affluent, democratic Western world can maintain its current operational mechanisms and internal logic for a considerable time. It is worthwhile to identify and analyse their specific features.

Chapter 1 and 2 comprise the theory-building efforts of this thesis that seek to construct a systematic, applicable model to describe the political communication process in China’s media sphere and the various participants’ interconnections. The remaining chapters explain the research design method the researcher adopted, as well as provide empirical evidence and explanations for the theoretical framework the thesis proposed by examining the discourse, practices, and roles of three different communicative dimensions in China’s political communication sphere—the official discourses, civic discussions, and the political, social and media elites’ engagements on political issues.

3 Research Design and Method

This thesis advances a theoretical framework comprising three types of national political communication spaces as part of its examination of the media-politics dynamics in the digital epoch, and also categorizes the Chinese context as belonging to the second type of ‘vigorous but censored’ space (see Chapter 2). To examine how China’s ‘censored but vigorous’ political communication space is embedded in and has evolved with social contexts, and how diverse media participants interactively play the roles of actor, connector and interlocutor, a case study approach is adopted. News reporting and media discussions on the issue of Sino-Japanese relations have been selected in this thesis because of the significance and openness of this topic in China’s political and media spheres. As two influential Asian powers, China and Japan have been significant to each other in terms of geopolitics, national security, economy and trade, and culture (Downs & Saunders, 1999; Hollihan, 2014; Reilly, 2011, 2014). However, the long-term hostility and conflict between these two nations have created complex and vulnerable bilateral relations. These important but sensitive bilateral relations have attracted vast media coverage and public attention, and this has provided sufficient research data for this thesis. Moreover, as a hotly debated topic of international affairs in China, Sino-Japanese relations are largely open for public discussion and alternative viewpoints (compared with some highly sensitive issues such as Tibet or the Tiananmen Square protests, both of which scarcely appear as topics of discussion in China’s communication space). The Chinese government is capable of blocking and deleting media coverage regarding a few sensitive issues at the expense of lifting restrictions on public engagement and discussion around most non-sensitive matters involving foreign relations, public policy, corruption, economics, government misbehavior, and livelihood (Tai, 2014; Wu, 2005). Therefore, this tentative, explorative work is expected to shed light on the general configurations of media-politics dynamics in contemporary China, rather than covering all political situations—especially those of extreme cases.

The specific research method adopted in this thesis is a mixed approach combining quantitative and qualitative analysis of media narratives. The previous chapters have proposed to examine China’s political communication arrangement through the research model of the ‘actor, connector and interlocutor’ (see Chapter 2), suggesting that China’s official media assume the role of monopolistic ‘actor’; that the public mainly acts as the ‘connector’; and that political and media elites serve as ‘interlocutors’. This chapter locates the ‘actor’ dimension within

China's most comprehensive Party organ of the *People's Daily*, and the 'connector' and 'interlocutor' dimensions within China's most important social networking site, Sina Weibo. The general users' (non-verified users) online comments and discussions on Sino-Japanese relations represent the 'connector' dimension, while Sina Weibo's verified users (who usually are political and media 'influentials') are investigated as belonging to the 'interlocutor' dimension. Some background information about Sino-Japanese relations and the specific research methods adopted in this thesis are introduced in this chapter.

3.1 Case Study: Sino-Japanese Relations and the Chinese Media's Coverage of Japan

Japan was considered one of the most suitable choices when selecting a country to investigate China's media-politics interactions because of the significance of Sino-Japanese relations to China, and the enthusiastic engagements with this topic in China's communicative space among diverse media actors (Lye & Wu, 2013; Sun, 1995). Events or conflicts with Japan have usually aroused the most emotional responses among the Chinese media and public (Cairns & Carlson, 2016; Stockmann, 2010). These responses have caused Sino-Japanese relations to become a top-priority diplomatic issue for the Chinese leadership, and a spectacular feast for various media actors, including party organs, commercial news agencies and numerous netizens.

As two influential Asian powers, China and Japan have been significant to each other in terms of geopolitics, national security, economy and trade, and culture (Downs & Saunders, 1999; Hollihan, 2014; Reilly, 2011). However, the long-term hostility that originated from the war of the Chinese people's resistance against Japanese aggression (1937-1945, hereinafter referred to as the Second Sino-Japanese War), and contemporary confrontation over realistic interests between these two nations have created complex and vulnerable bilateral relations. Despite being significant trading partners for many years, in recent years the Japanese and Chinese governments have had little effective political dialogue and cooperation. Public opinion of each other's country has shown a continuous deterioration since the 2012 Diaoyu/Senkaku islands dispute. According to the 2016 Japan-China Joint Opinion Poll Analysis Report (2016), almost all Japanese (91.6%) who were surveyed had an 'unfavorable' view of China and a high majority (76.7%) of the Chinese respondents expressed an 'unfavorable' attitude toward Japan.

Under the combined circumstances of increasing escalation of Sino-Japanese conflicts and deteriorating bilateral relations, some scholars have explored the political and social function of the Chinese media in Sino-Japanese relations. There seem to exist two different opinions about the role and function played by the Chinese media in Sino-Japanese relations—and specifically their involvement in manipulating or suppressing anti-Japanese sentiment, —both of which have received wide empirical support. A widely held view is that the Chinese government has been responsible for the deterioration of political bilateral relations due to its dissemination of material containing nationalistic and patriotic content, and its control of the mass media, which have stoked anti-Japanese passion (Downs & Saunders, 2012; Kawashima, 2015; Zhao, 2005). It has also been argued that the Chinese media's incitement and propaganda has been very effective, as it has resulted in an increase in nationalism and anti-Japanese sentiment among the Chinese public (Lye & Wu, 2013; Reilly, 2013; Stockmann, 2010). While some believe the Chinese government has used the media to encourage and manipulate popular nationalism and anti-Japanese passion, resulting in a deterioration of Sino-Japanese relations (Downs & Saunders, 2012; Kawashima, 2015; Lye & Wu, 2013), other studies have argued that the Chinese media have suppressed anti-Japanese sentiment rather than provoked it because of potential political risks (Tang & Darr, 2012). According to this view, the media's mobilization of public response to the conflict could endanger the maintenance of social stability and political order, resulting in unexpected consequences (Tang & Darr, 2012). For example, there has been a concern that public indignation towards foreign states may turn into discontent towards the Chinese authority because the public may consider the government too weak to protect its people and sovereignty, which could potentially lead to revolution.

Despite these opposite viewpoints, most current research on the media's role in Sino-Japanese relations is likely to fall into the one of the categories of reductionism introduced in Chapter 3 (namely, the event-based, crisis-driven and internal-homogeneity perspectives described there). Those studies usually focus on the Chinese media's reporting and discussions during significant bilateral events and crises, such as the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute in 2012, and China's anti-Japanese demonstrations in 2005, 2010 and 2012 (e.g. Cairns & Carlson, 2016; Denmark & Chubb, 2016; Lye & Wu, 2013; Reilly, 2013; Stockmann, 2013). However, as the 'rally around the flag effect' suggests that the media and public usually uncritically stand with the government during periods of international crisis or war (Mueller, 1970), it is problematic to generalize about Chinese media practices and the influence of such 'crisis

reporting' and discussions. Extending the scope of studies to embrace wider time-periods that include peacetime Sino-Japanese relations might provide some alternative findings in regard to the differentiation and segmentation of views within the Chinese media and related public discussions. Therefore, the present research presents a longitudinal analysis that incorporates both quantitative and qualitative content analysis designs and encompasses several significant bilateral crises between China and Japan, as well as a period of peace and stability with respect to bilateral relations between the two countries.

3.2 Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis of Media Narratives

The specific research methods adopted in this research are mixed, and combined quantitative content analysis (QCA, see Nenuendorf's *The Content Analysis Guidebook*, 2016) and qualitative (or ethnographic) content analysis (ECA, see Altheide and Schneider's canonical text of *Qualitative Media Analysis*, 2013). It should be noted that the selection of a quantitative or qualitative design approach does not rely on the specific amount of the documents being examined (in fact this research qualitatively analyzed more than ten thousand online posts from China's social networking site Sina Weibo), but rather depends on the analytical strategies employed as well as their underlying theoretical/conceptual assumptions. As Nenuendorf states:

The phenomenon under investigation, or the constructs being examined, might be very qualitative in nature, and the analyses applied might be indisputably quantitative. The reverse is also possible, in which quantitative events might be interpreted in a qualitative fashion. (Nenuendorf, 2016, p.10)

Quantitative content analysis is generally considered hypothetico-deductive, and its major task is to verify or confirm hypothesized relationships. Therefore, the priori of QCA is usually derived from and guided by established theory and constructed through operational definitions of concepts to obtain enumerative data for purposes of measurement (Krippendorff, 2004; Nenuendorf, 2016). Differently, Qualitative content analysis is oriented to concept development and to supplementing or supplanting prior theoretical claims (Hijman, 1996). This approach follows a recursive and reflexive, rather than linear, movement between concept development, sampling, data coding and analysis, and interpretation (Berg, 1989). During the process of qualitative analysis, 'categories and variables initially guide the study, but others are allowed and expected to emerge throughout the study, including an orientation

toward constant discovery and constant comparison of relevant situations, settings, styles, images, meanings, and nuances' (Altheide & Schneider, 2013, p.26). When adopting a qualitative approach, providing good descriptive information is as important as, if not more important than, counting items and topics into categories.

In this thesis, a mixed approach that integrates quantitative and qualitative analyses was used, though not simply because the author wanted to diversify her methodological arrangement. Rather, the application (or void) of a relevant theory/concept that could guide the sub-questions, as well as different sub-research tasks, have determined the methodology to be used in each case: namely, that of quantitative or qualitative design. More specifically, the 'actor' dimension of China's official media narratives concerning Sino-Japanese relations was analyzed in a quantitative fashion because this analytical section was informed by the concepts and discourse of 'geopolitical fear' and 'geoeconomic hope' (Cowen & Smith, 2009; Sparke, 2007). The main task of this analytical chapter (Chapter 4) is to test the Chinese media's representations of those two discourses when reporting on Japan and Sino-Japanese relations. By contrast, for the 'connector' dimension of public discussions about China's social media, a qualitative approach was selected because the content analysis of digital debates around the issue of Sino-Japanese relations aimed to discover emergent patterns, and also to develop a new concept that could better capture the changing nature and specific characteristic of mass deliberation in the Chinese context (related findings see Chapter 5). As for the 'interlocutor' dimension, the method of examining Sina's verified users' online practices involved a combination of quantitative analysis, which was used to code Sina users' profiles, while a qualitative approach was adopted to code their posts. Svensson's (2014) research has investigated the composition of Sina's verified users by randomly selecting 300 verified users to determine their occupations and institutions, and this provided a guideline and reference for this study to quantitatively test the users' profiles. In addition, to explore those verified users' discourses when discussing Sino-Japanese relations, a qualitative method was used to discover the emergent narrative patterns that 'digital influentials' displayed during the 're-mediation' process in China's political communication space. The specific samples and processes of content analyses are explained in the following sections.

3.2.1 Samples: The People's Daily and Sina Weibo

The *People's Daily* and Sina Weibo were selected as sample sources for this study because of their political significance and popularity, respectively. This thesis proposes to examine

China's political communication arrangement through the research model of the 'actor, connector and interlocutor' (see Chapter 2), suggesting that China's official media assume the role of monopolistic 'actor'; that the public mainly acts as the 'connector'; and that political and media elites serve as 'interlocutors'. This thesis also locates the 'actor' dimension within China's most comprehensive Party organ of the *People's Daily*, and the 'connector' and 'interlocutor' dimensions within China's most important social networking site, Sina Weibo. The general users' online comments and discussions about Sino-Japanese relations represent the 'connector' dimension, while Sina Weibo's verified users (who are usually political and media 'influentials') are labelled and researched as belonging to the 'interlocutor' dimension.

The *People's Daily* is the most comprehensive Party newspaper, being owned by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, and is published worldwide. As the leading party newspaper, the *People's Daily* is a highly representative news source for examining China's official discourse on political issues, and therefore it has been chosen by many previous studies that have also sought to investigate the Chinese government's policy stance and practice with respect to a variety of domestic and international affairs. Their findings illustrated that when reporting domestic matters, news coverage from the *People's Daily* tends to be strictly in accordance with the party line, conveying a positive stance by applauding the profound achievements that China has made under the CCP's leadership, and appreciating what the government had done to remedy social problems (e.g. air pollution, see Li & Zeng, 2016; terrorism attack, see Chang, 2015; corruption, see Zhao, 2016). Furthermore, during significant political crises and public emergencies, the *People's Daily* holds the exclusive power to set the public agenda, as the Chinese government usually bans commercial and online media coverage of these events, such as during the Songhua River pollution incident in 2005 (Tilt & Xiao, 2010), the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003 (Tai & Sun, 2007), and the Wenzhou high-speed train collision in 2011 (King et al., 2013). With regards to the *People's Daily's* reporting of foreign issues and international relations, the majority of previous studies focused their coverage on the US, Japan, and Russia (e.g. Lee, 1981; Liu & Yang, 2015; Parsons & Xiaoge, 2001; Sun, 1995; Zhuang, 2016). Their results show that while the US and Japan are usually framed in a negative way, with emphasis on some political-ideological and military-strategic conflicts, Russia's national image was presented in a much more positive light in the *People's Daily* through its highlighting of Sino-Russian cooperation and friendship. The *People's Daily* has two different print versions: a domestic Chinese edition, and an overseas edition that targets

overseas Chinese and is published in more than 80 countries and regions. Like most previous studies that have analysed the discourses and political implications of the *People's Daily*, this thesis chose its domestic Chinese edition as a research sample.

Sina Weibo is a Chinese microblog website, and it is often seen or described as the 'Chinese Twitter' (Sullivan, 2014). The launch of Sina Weibo was within the dual contexts of the increasing market demand for social networking sites (SNSs) in China, as well as the Chinese government's restriction and blocking of Western-based SNSs, including Facebook, Twitter and Youtube (Gu, 2014). In August 2009, one month after the Chinese government blocked Twitter due to riots in the Western region of Xinjiang (Wauters, 2009), Sina Corporation launched its social network platform, Sina Weibo. Since it was launched, Sina Weibo has seen explosive growth in terms of registered users and market value. According to its financial report of the second quarter of 2016, Sina Weibo had 282 million active subscribers and quarterly operation revenue of 927 million China Yuan (CNY). Akin to a hybrid of Twitter and Facebook, it has been and continues to be one of the most popular SNSs in China, and is viewed as having 'monopolize[d]' the market (Tong & Lei, 2012, p. 297).

It has been argued that Sina Weibo has provided a platform for robust, global, and networked communication for Chinese people because of its user-friendly design and massive popularity. Cloned from Twitter, Sina Weibo's interface shares many similarities with its Western counterpart. However, due to the nature of the Chinese language and other improvements implemented by Sina Corporation, Sina Weibo has its own unique features. For instance, it integrates a host of applications such as 'Micro Topic', where users can join a specific topic discussion in this area, and 'Micro Group', which allows users to create their own communities by recruiting microbloggers with common interests into a group. Furthermore, Sina Weibo incorporates an online chatting function to provide a more direct interface for microbloggers to communicate to each other (Gu, 2014). Therefore, Sina Weibo provides an easy entry for users and promotes instantaneous interaction among them. Its well-designed and user-friendly interface, as well as its language efficiency, sheer volume of information flow, and rapid diffusion have not only attracted abundant numbers of users in a short period of nine years, but have also transformed it into an influential communication space.

Sina Weibo has an extremely high number of subscribers and a wide, global distribution. Its users comprise Chinese who live in Mainland China, overseas immigrants and students,

ethnic Chinese who live in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and other nations, and foreigners who live in China or are interested in Chinese society and culture (Gu, 2014; Wang et al., 2014). Because of its transnational users, Sina Weibo's process of information flow has features of globalization. Through Sina Weibo, news of a sudden event which has taken place in a small town in China may travel to the United Kingdom in a few seconds, and return to Beijing with the latest BBC comments on the issue. In another case, the landing of several Hong Kong activists on a disputed, inhabited island in the East China Sea may be disseminated on Sina Weibo and provoke fierce reactions from the government and non-officials of mainland China, Japan, and the United States (Gu, 2014). Because Sina Weibo offers a globally, robustly networked communication sphere, it has been recognized as a representative sample in previous research where a number of studies have investigated the practices and attitudes of Chinese netizens, as well as the Chinese government's censorship policies in the digital media era through a content analysis of its online posts (e.g., Chen & Zhang, 2016; Nip & Fu, 2016). For instance, corruption cases and cases of misbehaviour by officials have first been exposed on Sina Weibo, and then attracted attention from mainstream media and the government. Some studies have contended that Chinese netizens have used Sina Weibo to express their anger towards the authorities, which can turn into 'online mass incidents' (*wangluo quntixing shijian*) that have influenced political outcomes (e.g., Tang & Sampson, 2012).

This research collected and analysed Chinese language news coverage of Japan and Sino-Japanese relations from the *People's Daily* between January 2001 and December 2015, as well as online posts about Japan from Sina Weibo between September 2009 and December 2016. However, when adopting longitude analyses of media debates from China's press and social media, it should be noted that date gaps exist in data collection—news reportage from the *People's Daily* was collected for a 15-year period whereas online posts from Sina Weibo were collected for a shorter period of seven years and four months. Since Sina Weibo was not launched until August 2009, the date gap in data collection is inevitable. Although the research period of data collection from China's press and social media was did not completely coincide, the researcher contends that the selected periods of data were in accordance with the research aim of this thesis, and were qualified to get a reliable conclusion. This thesis does not aim at conducting a simultaneously comparative analysis among China's different media outputs regarding Sino-Japanese relations, which might require a completely matched data set. Instead, it sheds light on the recent developments, trajectories and transformations of China's

media sphere from a three-dimensional perspective of ‘actor, connector and interlocutor’, in which each dimension has its own characteristic and could be examined from a relatively independent way, and the integration of the findings generated from these three dimensions ultimately leads to a general description of China’s political communication space. Therefore, this approach allows a flexible data setting—as long as the data is representative of the general trends and updated changes of each communicative dimension, and does not limit the data collection of each communicative dimension within an absolutely coincidental manner. For the ‘actor’ dimension of China’s official media, the research embraces a 15-year research period because it encompasses several significant bilateral crises between China and Japan (e.g., in 2005, 2010 and 2012) as well as a period of peace and stability of bilateral relations (2006-2011), which overcomes the conflict-focused reductionist perspective in existing literature on the media’s role in China’s foreign affairs. For the ‘connector’ dimension of Chinese public deliberation and the ‘interlocutor’ dimensions of China’s media, political and social elites’ remediation of political discourse, the researcher collected and analysed Sina Weibo’s debates from a very early stage of the platform’s launch in 2009 until the end of 2016, which included longitude and comprehensive data from this social networking site. In conclusion, because the data selections are reasonable for the theoretical framework and research design of this thesis, the researcher believes the date gaps in the data collection do not affect the validity of the analysis, argument and conclusion of this thesis.

News articles published in the *People’s Daily* were collected from its official databases using key word searches of ‘Japan’ (*riben*) and ‘Sino-Japanese’ (*zhongri*) within the limited time period of 2001-2015. This research collected a total of 7,154 news articles of manageable size about Japan from the *People’s Daily*. All of the articles were included for analysis without reducing the data by random sampling. For Sina Weibo, the research method was slightly different considering the huge number of online posts regarding Japan, which prevented the analysis of each post. Therefore, a random sampling technique was adopted for choosing samples from Sina Weibo. A data-scraping tool (Jiweiku 集微库) was used to mine the same keywords ‘Japan’ and ‘Sino-Japanese’ from Sina Weibo posts published during the period of September 2009 to December 2016. The analysts enumerated all the posts on Japan from Sina Weibo using this data-scraping tool, and then applied the random function in Excel to randomize the posts, determining which would be analysed. However, the author of this thesis admit that considering that (1) social media platforms including Sina Weibo are under strict CCP censorship and (2) online posts were not collected in real time, there is a good possibility

that the population of posts from which this sample is drawn may have already been subjected to censorship.

For the ‘connector dimension’ of the general public discussion (Sina Weibo’s non-verified users), a sample of 10 posts for each day was randomly collected, totalling 25,500 posts on Japan and Sino-Japanese relations. After excluding the invalid content, the virtual sample for this study comprised 18,295 posts (the effective information rate was 71.74%). A further 3,640 news organizations’ posts were excluded because the focus of this study was on China’s public deliberation rather news media reports, resulting in a final sample of 14,655 posts being analysed. Similarly, for the ‘interlocutor dimension’ of media elites’ online comments (Sina Weibo’s verified users), a sample of five posts for each day was randomly collected, totalling 12,775 posts. After excluding the invalid content, the virtual sample for this study included 10,850 posts that were subsequently coded and analysed.

3.2.2 Process of Quantitative Content Analysis of News Coverage of Sino-Japanese Relations from the People’s Daily (Related Findings See Chapter 4)

The key question of Chapter 4, which examines the ‘actor’ dimension of China’s political communication space, is ‘what is China’s official narrative of Japan and Sino-Japanese relations?’ This research question is driven by the theory of the discourses of ‘geopolitical fear’ and ‘gocioeconomic hope’ (Cowen & Smith, 2009), and it is a query about the empirical reality of the Chinese media’s practices with respect to these two opposed discourses in its reporting of the complicated bilateral relations between China and Japan. Therefore, a deductive approach was adopted during the quantitative content analysis process, comprising four stages: (1) selecting variables and measurements; (2) developing coding schemes (codebook; coding form) and coder training; (3) data coding; and (4) data analysis and reporting.

Stage 1: Selecting variables and measurements

Nenuendorf (2016) recommends several techniques for selecting variables for quantitative content analysis, and accordingly in this chapter the researcher has employed a common one of using related theory and past research for variable collection. The geopolitical discourse (geopolitical fear andocioeconomic hope, which are geo-strategic discourses of framing represent the logic of global interchange, see Cowen & Smith, 2009) informed this analytical section, and therefore, was employed as a crucial recapitulative variable. In addition, past

research on China's media's reporting on foreign relations, especially its relations with the U.S., Russia and Japan, has provided precise variables for variables (e.g., Lee, 1981; Liu & Yang, 2015; Sun, 1995; Zhuang, 2016). For instance, a very useful and replicable variable from past studies in analysing news content regarding foreign issues and international relations is the specific 'stance' an individual news article conveys (e.g., conflictive/cooperative/neutral), and this approach was directly applied in this study. In terms of the level of measurement, this study mainly adopted the nominal measure scale, which consists of a set of categories that are distinct from one another. The use of numbers is for labelling only—words or letters would work just as well (Nenuendorf, 2016). For example, both of the variables 'stance' and 'geopolitical discourse' are nominal measures.

Stage 2: Developing coding schemes (codebook and coding form) and coder training

After variables and measurements were settled, the author of this thesis started to construct coding schemes. The coding scheme comprised of (a) a codebook by which all measures for human content analysis coding were fully explicated, and (b) a coding form that provided spaces appropriate for recoding the codes for all variables measured (Nenuendorf, 2016). As Conway's (2006) direct comparison using newspaper articles during the 2002 Texas gubernatorial primary confirmed with regard to his summary of past research: as computer-aided text analysis (CATA) was discovered to be best at simple word counts and less effective for more 'nuanced' coding, this study employed human coding rather than CATA. Human coders, therefore, played a vital part in the coding process. In this study, coder training was inextricably linked with the codebook development. The author first wrote a codebook with variable selection and measurement, followed by coder training through discussions, and then two coders practiced coding together, engaging in consensus-building discussion. Based on these discussions, the author then revised the codebook and coding form several times until two coders were all comfortable with the coding scheme. The next step involved the pilot and intercoder reliability check. Two coders coded a pilot subsample (200 news articles) for reliability purposes and revised the coding scheme before the final coding process. The coding form is shown in Appendix 1.

Stage 3: Data coding

After a coding scheme was finally set, the process of coding data commenced. Two coders collected the data using preset codes and noting many descriptive examples. Although quantitative coding is generally a deductive approach by which categories are preset and fixed,

during the actual coding process, there were sometimes additions made to the coding scheme in a ‘grounded’ process whereby constructs emerged from the content as salient, based on the coders notes, after which the author of this thesis made the decision to add measures (Nenuendorf, 2016). The coders then completed the data collection.

Stage 4: Data analysis and reporting

After data collection, the author of this study performed the final data analysis. Features, statistics and over-time trends of variables were analyzed and are reported in the following chapter. In general, Chapter 5 is organized and unfolds around the highly recapitulative variable of ‘the geopolitical discourse the news article conveyed’. Characteristics and figures of other variables are presented as well. Examples, extremes and exceptions are noted in detail in Chapter 4.

Intercoder reliability check

The author of this thesis strongly agrees with the contention of Nenuendorf (2016) that ‘reliability is paramount for human coding content analysis... without the establishment of reliability, content analysis measures are useless’ (p.165). Intercoder reliability was assessed at two points during content analysis process: pilot and final. The pilot reliability check was conducted after initial coder training and before the study began. The final reliability assessment was done on a second, randomly selected subsample (10% of the total sample = 750 news articles) during the full data collection to fairly represent the coders’ performance throughout the study. The widely used reliability coefficients of percent agreement (or crude agreement) and Cohen’s *kappa* were applied with the help of the computer program *Com kappa3*. These final reliability figures are reported with the study’s results.

3.2.3 Process of Qualitative Analysis of Digital Debates on Sino-Japanese Relations from Sina Weibo (Related Findings See Chapter 5)

For the ‘connector’ dimension of public discussions on China’s social media, a qualitative approach was selected since the content analysis of digital debates around the issue of Sino-Japanese relations aimed to discover emergent patterns, and also to develop new concept that could better capture the changing nature and specific characteristics of mass deliberation in the Chinese context. There were also four stages in the process of qualitative content analysis of digital debates on Sino-Japanese relations from Sina Weibo’s general users, involving: (1) confirming question and data; (2) constructing a protocol; (3) data coding; (4)

data analysis and reporting.

Stage 1: Confirming question and data.

To explore the ‘connector’ dimension of China’s political communication space—i.e. public engagement with political issues and mass deliberation—the focus of examination here is on China’s digital sphere, in which ordinary individuals can easily access, disseminate and produce news and information and, therefore, participate in civic discussions. The key research question of Chapter 5 is: How is the topic of Japan debated in China’s digital sphere, which reflects the Chinese people’s perception of Sino-Japanese relations?

To answer this question and contribute to the theoretical understanding of mass deliberation in the Chinese context, an inductive qualitative approach was selected. Online posts on Sino-Japanese relations from China’s most popular social networking site, Sina Weibo, were selected as the research sample. The unit of analysis was the individual post. Then, the author of this study and another trained coder—a native Chinese graduate student who majors in media and communication—spent two weeks becoming familiar with the data through reading some randomly chosen posts on this topic. In addition, because the two coders have previously coded and analyzed the *People’s Daily’s* news coverage on Sino-Japanese relations, they have obtained significant background understanding about this issue and the official Chinese media’s representation of it.

Stage 2: Constructing a protocol.

When the two coders both felt that they were familiar enough with the online posts on Sino-Japanese relations, the protocol development was conducted. The author and the second coder worked together to list several items or categories (variables) to guide data collection, and drafted a protocol (data collection sheet). Some basic categories included in the protocol involved the date, length, supplementary data, theme (focus or emphasis), and stance (emotional attitude). Then, the protocol was tested by collecting data from a small proportion (500 online posts) of the total samples. The coders revised the protocol, and selected several additional cases to further refine it. Eventually, one important and recapitulative category emerged and was added to the protocol, namely ‘the point of view’. This category comprised four sub-categories including ‘emotional, malcontent expressions’, ‘rational, constructive perceptions’, ‘positive energy transmissions’, and ‘bystander viewpoints’. The full protocol sheet is shown in Appendix 2.

Stage 3: Data coding.

When a protocol was set, coding of the data commenced. Two coders collected the data using preset codes and noting many descriptive examples. During the coding process, the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA was adopted to assist data coding and storage. It should be noted that the data coding process followed a recursive and reflexive, rather than linear, movement between concept development, data coding and analysis, and interpretation (Berg, 1989). About halfway through the sample, two coders examined the data to permit emergence, refinement, or collapsing of additional categories (for instance, the sub-category of ‘bystander viewpoints’ was transformed to ‘self-interested viewpoints’). Then the coders made appropriate adjustments to other data and completed the data collection.

Stage 4: Data analysis and reporting.

Finally, the two coders performed the final data analysis. They compared and contrasted extremes and key differences within each category, made textual notes, and also wrote brief overviews of data for each category. The coders then combined brief summaries with examples of the typical cases and extremes, and noted surprises about these cases and other material from the data. Through integrating the findings with the coders’ interpretations, Chapter 5 (in which the key concept of ‘reflexive deliberation’ was introduced to describe the heterogeneous consequence of public discussion and engagement in China’s digital sphere on the issue of Sino-Japanese relations) was finally drafted.

Intercoder-reliability

Because of the adoption of a human coding process, rigorous training and careful coding protocol development were conducted to achieve intercoder reliability. In addition, reliability checks were executed twice during the coding process. The first reliability check occurred in the protocol development stage. Two coders independently coded the same randomly chosen posts—500 Sina Weibo posts—to check the intercoder reliability for each category of the protocol. When disagreements emerged, the two coders worked together to discuss meanings and interpretations of categories and codes in order to achieve coder agreement for the remaining data coding. Then, during the actual coding process, a second ‘final’ intercoder reliability check was conducted. The two coders coded the same, randomly selected sample (10% of total sample). Reliability coefficients of percent agreement and Cohen’s *kappa* were

applied with the help of the computer program *Com kappa3*. These final reliability figures were reported with the study's results as well.

3.2.4 Process of the Mixed Method Analysis of Sina Weibo's Verified Users' Comments on Sino-Japanese Relations (Related Findings see Chapter 6)

The research method used to examine Sina's verified users' online practices involved a combination of quantitative analysis, which was used to code Sina users' profiles, and a qualitative approach that was adopted to code their posts. There were four stages that made up the mixed content analysis of Sina Weibo's verified users' comments on Sino-Japanese relations: (1) confirming questions, variables and measurements; (2) constructing a protocol; (3) data coding; (4) data analysis and reporting.

Stage 1: Confirming questions and variables

To investigate the 'interlocutor' role of China's political communication space—the media elites' remediation of political discourse regarding Sino-Japanese relations—the researcher focused her examination on the verified users from Sino Weibo. The specific way in which Sina's verified users operate as opinion leaders, thus becoming 'interlocutors' in China's digital sphere, will be explained in Chapter 6. The key questions of Chapter 6 are: 'what are the specific components of Sina Weibo's verified users, the big Vs, in the digital debate of Sino-Japanese relations? and what are the roles and practices of Chinese opinion leaders in the context of the digital debates surrounding Sino-Japanese relations?'

To answer those questions, the occupation/institution of Sina's verified users was selected as a crucial variable. The results of previous research investigations of the composition of Sina's verified users by randomly selecting 300 big Vs (Svensson, 2014) have provided a guideline and reference for quantitatively testing the users' profiles. Svensson (2014) has examined the occupations and institutions of big Vs, categorizing them into the following five types: (a) those who worked in the media sector, (b) those who came from institutions of higher education, (c) those who worked in business sector, (d) individuals from government bodies and Party institutions, and (e) others. This variable and the five sub-categories were directly applied in this study. The discursive strategies that Sina's verified users employed when discussing Sino-Japanese relations were chosen as an important variable. A qualitative method was used to discover the emergent narrative patterns that the 'digital influentials' displayed during the 're-mediation' process in China's political communication space.

Stage 2: Constructing a protocol.

Similar to the process of developing a protocol for analyzing the general public's online posts, the two coders first spent a week becoming familiar with the data through reading some randomly chosen posts on this topic. Then the two coders began to construct a protocol and coding schemes. Some basic categories included in the protocol included the date, length, and supplementary data. Then, two important variables were listed: the user's occupation, which was preset and relatively fixed, and the discourse/narrative on Sino-Japanese relations, which was loosely defined and open to revision. Then, the protocol was tested by collecting data from a small proportion (500 online posts) of the total sample. The coders revised the protocol and selected several additional cases to further refine it. Eventually, the discourse/narrative variable showed to be consisted with two subcategories involving the 'conflict-focused discourses' covering controversies and antagonism between China and Japan, and the 'pragmatism-driven viewpoints' that called for a more rational thinking and policy toward Japan. The full protocol sheet is shown in Appendix 3.

Stage 3: Data coding.

When a protocol was set, coding of the data commenced. Two coders collected the data using preset codes and noting many descriptive examples. During the coding process, the data analysis software MAXQDA was used to facilitate data coding and storage. About halfway through the sample, two coders examined the data to permit emergence, refinement, or collapsing of additional categories. Then the coders made appropriate adjustments to other data and completed the data collection.

Stage 4: Data analysis and reporting and intercoder-reliability

After the data collection phase, the present researcher performed the final data analysis. Features, statistics, and over-time trends of variables are analysed and reported in Chapter 7. Rigorous training and careful coding protocol development were also conducted to achieve intercoder reliability. In addition, reliability checks were executed twice during the coding process (the first reliability check occurred in the protocol development stage, and the second took place about two-thirds of the way through the sample). Reliability coefficients of percent agreement and Cohen's *kappa* were applied with the help of the computer program *Com kappa3*. These final reliability figures are reported in Chapter 6.

Conclusion

This chapter introduced the research design and method this thesis adopted: a mixed approach combining quantitative and qualitative analysis of the media debates on the issue of Sino-Japanese relations from China's most comprehensive party organ of the *People's Daily* and China's most important social networking site, Sina Weibo. The topic of Sino-Japanese relations was selected because of the significance and openness of this issue in China's media sphere, and therefore, Chinese media coverage and discussions of Sino-Japanese relations were considered as representative to shed light on the general transformations and trends in China's political communication space.

Chapter 2 of this thesis proposed to examine China's political communication arrangement through the research model of the 'actor, connector and interlocutor', suggesting that China's official media assume the role of monopolistic 'actor'; that the public mainly acts as the 'connector'; and that political and media elites serve as 'interlocutors'. The research design of this thesis located the 'actor' dimension within China's official media of the *People's Daily*, and the 'connector' and 'interlocutor' dimensions within China's social networking site of Sina Weibo. A mixed approach that integrates quantitative and qualitative content analysis was used. The application (or void) of a relevant theory/concept that could guide the sub-questions, as well as different sub-research tasks, have determined the methodology to be used in each case: namely, that of quantitative or qualitative design. More specifically, the 'actor' dimension of China's official media narratives concerning Sino-Japanese relations was analysed in a quantitative fashion because this analytical section was informed by the concepts and discourse of 'geopolitical fear' and 'geoeconomic hope' (Cowen & Smith, 2009; Sparke, 2007). The main task of this analytical chapter (Chapter 4) is to test the Chinese media's representations of those two discourses when reporting on Japan and Sino-Japanese relations. By contrast, for the 'connector' dimension of public discussions about China's social media, a qualitative approach was selected because the content analysis of digital debates around the issue of Sino-Japanese relations aimed to discover emergent patterns, and also to develop a new concept that could better capture the changing nature and specific characteristics of mass deliberation in the Chinese context. As for the 'interlocutor' dimension, the method of examining Sina's verified users' online practices involved a combination of quantitative analysis, which was used to code Sina users' profiles, while a qualitative approach was adopted to code their posts. Svensson's (2014) research has investigated the composition of Sina's verified users by randomly selecting 300 big Vs in 2013 to determine

their occupations and institutions, which provided a guideline and reference for this study to quantitatively test the users' profiles. In addition, to explore those verified users' discourses when discussing Sino-Japanese relations, a qualitative method was used to discover the emergent narrative patterns that 'digital influentials' displayed during the 're-mediation' process in China's political communication space. After introducing the specific research methods adopted for this study, the results of this research will be presented in the following chapters: 4, 5, and 6.

4 The Monopolistic Actor's Narration of Sino-Japanese Relations: A Combination of Geopolitical Fear and Goeconomic Hope

The previous chapter proposed a theoretical framework comprising three types of digital-networked political communication spaces ('symmetrical and fully-fledged', 'vigorous but censored', and 'infertile and unresponsive' spaces) to examine media-politics dynamics in diverse socio-political contexts. They also classified China's political communication sphere as type 2: 'vigorous but censored space', in which various media participants take the roles of actor, connector and interlocutor in the process of political information flow but their power and influence are far from symmetrical. The central argument of this thesis is that, in the Chinese context, although news consumption, dissemination and reproduction in online spaces involve wide, diverse participants with a low-threshold of literacy and digital skills, the original source of political information which refers to the 'actor' dimension has been legally, exclusively granted to the official media by the Chinese state, especially with regard to foreign, ethnic, territory affairs, and emergent public event issues (e.g., Hadland, 2015; Luo, 2014; Wu, 2005). Public discussion and deliberation take the role of the 'connector' in China's political communication space, in which masses of participants connect with each other by deliberating and engaging in the online discussion regarding political issues, where diverse viewpoints are formulated and debated. The media, political and social elites' re-mediation of political discourse represents the 'interlocutor' dimension, which dialogically integrates the communication space, links actors to connectors, and guides public opinion by selecting, contextualizing and interpreting officials' messages. This chapter investigates China's official media's coverage of Sino-Japanese relations and uncovers the monopolistic, hegemonic communication actor's discursive strategies in reporting foreign affairs. In addition, this chapter is of necessity to detect the interactions between three communicative dimensions in China's political communication space—the acceptance, negotiation, reconstruction, and rejection of the actor's discourse by the dimensions of connector and interlocutor.

To examine the monopolistic actor's narrations of Sino-Japanese relations, this chapter analyses the news coverage of Japan by China's most influential party newspaper, the *People's Daily*, between 2001 and 2015. Drawing upon the notions of geopolitical fear and goeconomic hope (Cowen & Smith, 2009; Sparke, 2007), this chapter presents a counter-argument to the prevailing view that assumes that the framing strategies of China

toward Japan are focused on issues of conflict, threat and fear (e.g., Lye & Wu, 2013; Reilly, 2013; Stockmann, 2010). Rather, the results show that it was through the combination of the discourses of geopolitical fears and geoeconomic hopes that the image(s) of Japan emerged in Chinese official media. To be specific, the Chinese official media's discourse of geopolitical fear mainly focused on the historical controversies and contemporarily territorial disagreements between China and Japan, Japan's active engagement in regional and international issues, as well as Japan's instability and militarization in domestic politics. On the contrary, its narratives of geoeconomic hope highlighted the cooperative accomplishment and potential between the Chinese and Japanese governments and sincere friendship between the two peoples, as well as the advanced aspects of Japan's domestic affairs.

This chapter unfolds as follows. It first introduces the concepts of geopolitical fear and geoeconomic hope in the field of political science (section 4.1), followed by the analyses of their embodiment in the *People's Daily's* narrations of Sino-Japanese relations (sections 4.2 and 4.3, respectively). Then, it suggests through the alignment and balance of the discourses of geopolitical fears and geoeconomic hopes, the monopolistic position of Chinese official media has embodied two aspects of China's political communication space: namely setting its key theme of 'emphasizing the CCP's contribution and legitimacy' and delimiting its boundary of 'maintaining social stability' (section 4.4). This chapter concludes that through setting themes and delimiting boundaries, China's official media aimed to increase public support of the regimes leadership and legitimacy, stabilize bilateral relations, and de-radicalize the Chinese public's antagonistic sentiments towards Japan, which highly parallels with the Chinese government's policies, stances and interests on this topic.

4.1 Geopolitical Fears and Geoeconomic Hopes

The language of geopolitics is deeply entangled with the building of the nation-state and the making of society. From the critical viewpoint of international relations, geopolitical discourses are manifested in the national stereotyping of peoples as a way of consolidating the national society 'at home' and the strategic labelling of the global otherness or evil 'abroad' to form the ideological and practical grounds for foreign policies or war (Cowen & Smith, 2009, p. 26). The (re)invention of the 'local others' and the 'global others' or 'evils' through geopolitical discourses and practices not only connects global tensions with insecurity at the local level (Koskela, 2010), but also creates a situation in which the emotion of fear is tied to the state, anchoring it in particular places and ascribing it to certain social/territorial relations

(Pain & Smith, 2008) in an attempt to mobilize political action, justify political policies or legitimize the exercise of control (Koskela, 2010 in Abu-Orf, 2012, p. 166).

The discourse of geopolitical fear as a geo-strategic discourse of framing represents an increasingly relic logic of global interchange, superseded in the era of globalization by a geo-economic logic that transcends geopolitical calculation, even if the system of nation states remains intact and powerful (Luttwak, 1990 in Cowen & Smith, 2009, p. 38). States have to renovate their modus operandi accordingly, from the rigid territoriality of politics to the supranational flows of capital, commodities, technologies and risks, from which the vision of geoeconomics emerges (Cowen & Smith, 2009). Here, geoeconomics is the conceptual shorthand describing the complex intersections of economics and finance with global political and security considerations (Kaufman, 2004).

The traditional discursive strategies of geopolitics, which have focused on territorial security, have to be reframed to accommodate supranational interdependence, leading to the reframing of the state as a geoeconomic agent (Cowen & Smith, 2009). Again, this thesis does not assume a historical succession from geopolitical to geoeconomic logic in the representational practices of the media, but it argues that the rise of geoeconomics, nonetheless, circumscribes, reworks and spatially reconfigures the discourse of geopolitics in the global communication sphere. The contest, incorporation and interaction between the language of geopolitics and geoeconomics constitute the key dynamics of the framing practices in contemporary political communication.

In a more specific sense, the geoeconomic logic of representation is often closely tied to the discourse of hope in international politics. This thesis argues that it is the combination of, and the changes in, the discourses of geopolitical fear and geoeconomic hope that lie at the heart of renovating the fear-fascinated and territorially-defined framing strategies predominant in contemporary political communication. Geopolitics and geoeconomics describe two geo-strategic discourses (Sparke, 2007, p. 340). The emotions of fear and hope are either geopolitically scripted or geo-economically enframed, whereby the political framing of international relations is (re)produced and negotiated. For instance, inside the US, the neoconservative political discourses that came to the surface following 9/11 have led to a fear-filled fascination with foreign threats ranging from 'peer competitors' to 'rogue regimes' to 'failed states' and 'terrorist cells' (Sparke, 2007, p.340); furthermore, 'geoeconomic

discourses compensate and console by offering a hope of transcending the divisions and correcting the failures’ of the geopolitical systems (Sparke, 2007, p.340). This interrelation is reflected in, for example, the contrast and reciprocity between the securitization discourse of mass weapons of destruction in Iraq and the ‘high’ hopes enframed in the geoeconomic discourses of reconnecting Iraq to free market democracies in the mainstream American media during the Iraq War (2003-2011).

Similar to the U.S media’s representation of Iraq combined discourses of geopolitical fear and geoeconomic hopes, (although those two opposite sides were asymmetrical of importance), the content analysis showed that the Chinese official media also adopted an integrated approach in its narration of Japan and Sino-Japanese relations, rather than created an one-sided image of ‘Japan as invader’. Before discussing the embodiment of both geopolitics and geoeconomics discourses in China’s most influential Party organ, the *People’s Daily*, results of main variables of content analysis are shown in Table 4.1 and summarised.

Table 4.1 Content analysis results of People’s Daily’s coverage of Japan and Sino-Japanese relations between 2001 and 2015 (N=7,154)

<p>Page/Section:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Front page (page 1): 2.45%, n=175 b. Important News (page 2-4): 43.40%, n=3,105 c. International News (page 9-10): 34.25%, n=2,450 d. Cultural and social News (page 12-14): 19.90%, n=1,424
<p>Topics (Themes):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Sino-Japanese War history and war-related issues: 21.16%, n=1,512 b. Sino-Japanese territorial dispute and other geopolitical conflicts: 7.99%, n=571 c. Sino-Japanese official cooperation: 20.91%, n=1,496 d. Sino-Japanese people-to-people exchanges: 16.35%, n=1,170 e. Japan’s international engagements: 10.76%, n=770 f. Japan’s domestic politics and military affairs: 5.49%, n=393 g. Japan’s domestic society: 13.94%, n=997 h. Japan’s domestic economy: 3.42%, n=245
<p>Stances:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Positive (Cooperative): 37.26%, n=2,666 b. Negative (Conflictive): 29.12%, n=2,083 c. Neutral: 33.62%, n=2,405
<p>Geo-discourses of the news coverage:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Geopolitical fears: 48.71%, n=3,485 b. Geoeconomic hopes: 51.29%, n=3,669

4.2 Discourses of Geopolitical Fears: Sino-Japanese Conflicts, Japan's International Engagement and Its Domestic Politics

The results of the content analysis suggested that over the past 15 years, the *People's Daily's* news coverage of Japan and Sino-Japanese relations appeared mostly in the section of Important News (page 2-4, 43.40%, $n=3,105$), followed by the section of International News (page 9-10, 34.25%, $n=2,450$), Cultural and Social News (page 12-14, 19.90%, $n=1,424$), and the Front page (page 1, 2.45%, $n=175$). Although only when covering extremely significant political events and crises between China and Japan, news articles were likely to be positioned in the Front page (such as the Chinese premier's visit to Japan and the Japanese government's nationalization of the Diaoyu/Senkaku island), the frequent appearances of the issues of Japan and Sino-Japanese relations in the sections of Important News, International News as well as Cultural and Social News well illustrated the importance and relevance of the bilateral relations to Chinese authority and the public.

As a profound origin of the CCP's legitimacy, the theme of the Second Sino-Japanese War (which usually highlights the glorious deeds and sacrifices of the first-generation CCP leaders in resisting Japan's invasion) and a variety of war-related issues was found to be the mostly oft-mentioned theme (topic) from the *People's Daily's* reportage of Japan (21.16%, $n=1,512$), followed by the themes of Sino-Japanese official cooperation (20.91%, $n=1,496$) and the people-to-people exchanges and friendship between China and Japan (16.35%, $n=1,170$). The news coverage that mentioned Japan's domestic society occupied the fourth place (13.94%, $n=997$), followed by Japan's international engagements (10.76%, $n=770$). One less reported theme was the Sino-Japanese contemporary territorial dispute and other geopolitical conflicts (7.99%, $n=571$), partly due to the potentially socio-political instability that might be caused by this topic. The least two oft-reported themes from the *People's Daily* are Japan's domestic politics and military affairs (5.49%, $n=393$), and Japan's domestic economy (3.42%, $n=245$). In terms of the stance, the findings of content analysis showed that the negative (conflictive), positive (cooperative) and neutral stances achieved similar frequencies by the *People's Daily*. The positive stance was covered the most (37.26%, $n = 2,666$), followed by the neutral stance (33.62%, $n = 2,405$) and the negative stances (29.12%, $n = 2,083$). This finding refutes the view that China's official media created a one-sided image of Japan as a foe by disseminating only conflictive content on Japan. Most of the frames consisted of positive and neutral frames, which suggested that the *People's Daily* provided a more comprehensive and benign picture of Japan and Sino-Japanese relations, rather than only underscoring bilateral conflict.

In general, the results of longitude analysis showed that between 2001 and 2015 the *People's Daily's* reportage of Japan and Sino-Japanese relations did not reflect any direct or immediate historical succession from geopolitics fear to geoeconomic hope, or trend of vice versa. The numbers of geopolitical fear discourses and geoeconomic hope discourse achieved the similar frequencies (48.71%, $n=3,485$ and 51.29%, $n=3,669$, respectively). The *People's Daily* contained the co-existence of both geo-strategic logics and its interaction with the emotions of fear and hope in many circumstances. To be specific, the *People's Daily* took on a geopolitical fear narrative when reporting on bilateral conflicts between China and Japan including their historical controversies and contemporary territorial disputes, and Japan's active engagements in regional and international affairs as well as its instability and militarization in domestic politics. By doing that, the *People's Daily* framed Japan as the former foe and proactive rival of China, and dangerous player in the international community. However, on the other hand, the *People's Daily* adopted a geoeconomic hope discourse when covering Sino-Japanese official cooperation, people-to-people friendship, as well as Japanese domestic society and economy. It portrayed Japan as China's complementary partner, old friend with centuries-long exchanges, and worth learning paragon on varies domestic matters. The key themes, subthemes and representative cases of each geo-strategic discourse are shown in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Geo-strategic discourses of news coverage of Japan and Sino-Japanese relations by the *People's Daily* between 2001 and 2015 ($N=7,154$)

Discourses of geopolitical fears	Discourses of geoeconomic hopes
<p>Theme1: Sino-Japanese historical conflict Subtheme 1: The Second Sino-Japanese War (Examples: The memorial events of Victory over Japan Day, PD, 15/05/2014; Honouring the national heroes who fought against the Japanese aggressors, 07/07/2013) Subtheme 2: The war-related controversies (Examples: 'Koizumi's visit to Yasukuni Shrine is a challenge to human conscience and international justice', PD, 18/10/2005; Japan's <i>New History Textbook</i> was doomed to failure, PD, 12/04/2005)</p> <p>Theme2: China-Japan Contemporary disputes (Examples: Japanese companies' exploitation of oil and gas resources in the East China Sea, PD, 05/07/2006; China coast guard patrol of the Diaoyu and surrounding waters, PD, 03/02/2014)</p>	<p>Theme 1: The official contacts between Chinese and Japanese governments Subtheme1: Exchanges of Chinese and Japanese leaders' visits Subtheme2: Asian Cooperation between China, Japan and South Korea Subtheme3: The mutual help in tackling natural disasters between China and Japan</p> <p>Theme 2: People-to-People exchanges form the solid foundation of bilateral friendship (Examples: the Japanese missions to Tang China, PD, 25/04/2007, 16/04/2008; the endless friendship between China and Japan—the Sino-Japanese Youth Party held in Beijing in 1984, PD, 17/06/2007; 'Astro Boy and Sun Wukong': Chinese and Japanese cartoonists' interactions (PD, 06/04/2012).</p>

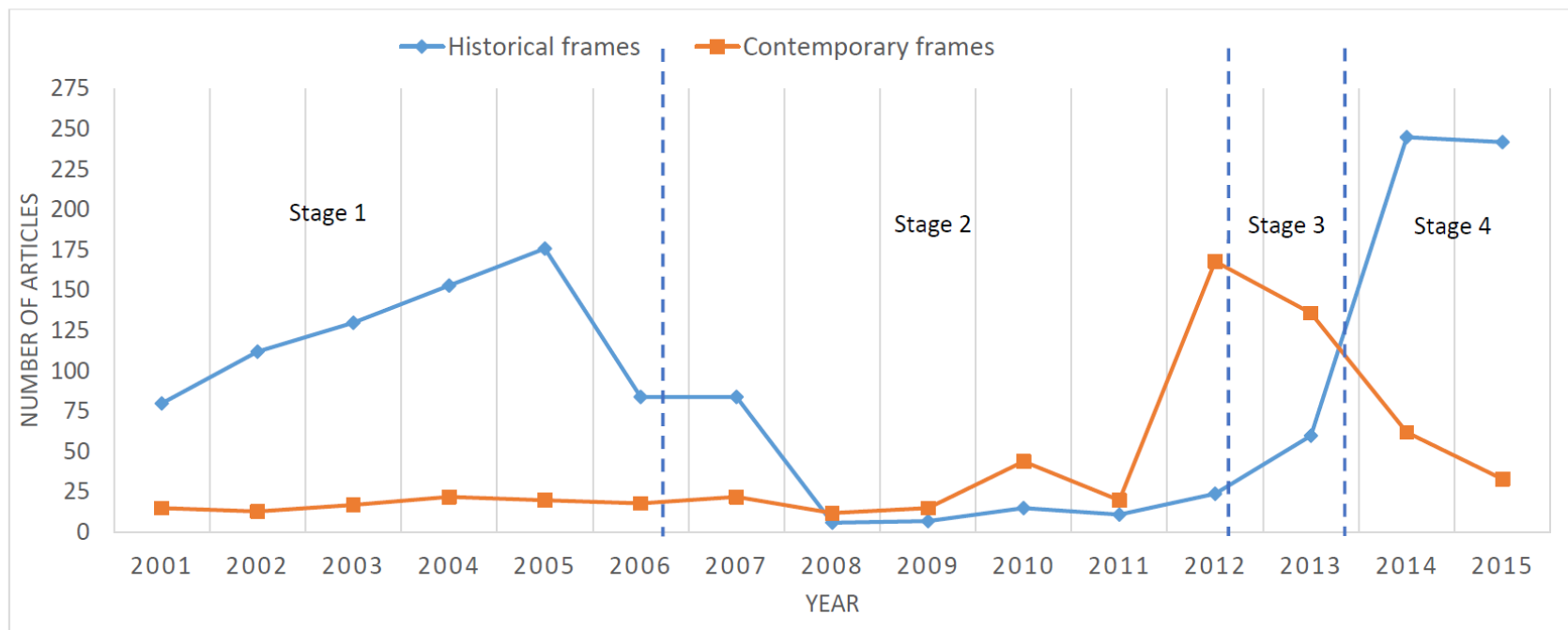
<p>Theme 3: Japan’s international engagements</p> <p>Subtheme 1: Japan-US relations (Example: the unsolved relocation of the US military base in Futenma, PD, 13/11/2009)</p> <p>Subtheme 2: Japan-South Korea relations (Example: the Japan-South Korean territorial controversy on the Dokdo/Takeshima island, PD, 20/08/2012)</p> <p>Subtheme 3: Japan-North Korea relations</p> <p>Subtheme 4: Japan-Russia relations (Example: Japanese-Russian conflict over the Kuril Islands, PD, 21/08/2006)</p> <p>Subtheme 5: Japan’s interactions with other nations</p> <p>Theme 4: Japan’s domestic political instability and militarization</p>	<p>Theme 3: Japan’s domestic society and economy—A sustainable, energetic and innovative society</p> <p>Subtheme1: Japan’s innovation capability (Example: Japan developed the highest speed camera, PD, 12/08/2014)</p> <p>Subtheme2: Japan’s cultural and society</p> <p>Subtheme3: Japan’s environmental protection and energy conservation (Example: Japan successfully developed bioplastics, PD, 15/09/2011)</p> <p>Subtheme4: The innovation-cantered enterprise culture of Japanese companies. (Example: Panasonic develops new methanol fuel battery, PD, 21/10/2008)</p>
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4.2.1 The Alternating Rises of Historical Controversies and Contemporarily Territorial Disputes between China and Japan

Historical controversies and contemporarily territorial disputes are two important themes of Sino-Japanese conflicts, which constituted the main discourse of geopolitical fears regarding Japan. As the Second Sino-Japanese war brought the most bitter and traumatic memory to Chinese people (Hollihan, 2014; Reilly, 2011), re-mentioning war history and unsettled, historical controversies are likely to renovate old fears to new ones—the concerns and worries of the resurgence of militarism in today’s Japan. The contemporarily bilateral territorial disputes, as the ‘national core interest’, play a more explicit function of fear-rising. Therefore, through reporting historical disagreements and current territorial confrontations between China and Japan, the *People’s Daily* portrayed Japan as the threat and rival of China, provoking emotions of fear, victimization and dissatisfaction among the Chinese public.

However, this chapter found that the *People’s Daily* were moderate and self-restrained in conveying geopolitical fears regarding Sino-Japanese relations, through narrowing down the bilateral conflicts as an either-or choice between historical controversies and contemporary disputes rather than combination of situations. The results of the content analysis showed that the discourse of geopolitical fears underwent four phases between 2001 and 2015: (1) the historical controversy of the Yasukuni Shrine dominated the conflictive reports (2001- August 2006); (2) a significant understatement of historical controversies and a slight increase in the frequency of reports on contemporary disputes under the amiable context of Sino-Japanese friendship (September 2006-September 2012); (3) the contemporary territorial dispute prevailed in the conflictive reports (September 2012-December 2013); and (4) the

rejuvenation of historical themes in the Xi-Abe era (2014-2015). These results are shown in Figure 4.1 and each phase is subsequently analyzed to provide some specific examples. In general, the switch between historical and contemporary themes from the *People's Daily* largely depended on the changes in Sino-Japanese relations and the Chinese government's policies and attitudes toward Japan under different political contexts. However, the *People's Daily* seldom highlighted the historical controversies and contemporary confrontations simultaneously, which suggested that it did not convey a full opposition to bilateral relations. When employing the geopolitical fear narrative to report Sino-Japanese relations, the *People's Daily* used a case-by-case approach which prevented the news on Japan from being too antagonistic.



Stage 1:
Historical controversy of the Yasukuni Shrine dominated the conflict frames (2001 – August 2006)

Stage 2:
Significant understatement of historical controversies and slightly increase of contemporary disputes under the amiable atmosphere of Sino-Japanese friendship (September 2006 – September 2012)

Stage 3:
The contemporary territorial dispute prevailed among the conflictive frames (September 2012 – December 2013)

Stage 4:
The rejuvenation of historical themes in the Xi-Abe era (2014 - 2015)

Figure 4.1 A comparison of the number of articles using the historical and contemporary frames for each year between 2001 and 2015

Stage 1. The historical controversy dominated the geopolitical discourse (2001- August 2006)

The analysis showed that historical themes dominated the discourse of geopolitical fears between 2001 and August 2006 while contemporary issues were rarely mentioned. One specifically historical controversy, the Yasukuni issue, was found to be the prominent topic during this period. The Yasukuni Shrine is a Japanese Shinto shrine that commemorates those who died in the service of the Empire of Japan but also honours 14 class-A criminals from World War II and the Second Sino-Japanese War. Therefore, Japanese officials' visits to the Yasukuni have made its Asian neighbours worry that Japan has not faced up to its aggressive history or shown true remorse. Between 2001 and August 2006, the then Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's annual visit to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine made this issue become the most media-covered topic by the *People's Daily*.

Many stories from the *People's Daily* criticized Koizumi's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine with a strong condemning tone and asserted that he would pay the price for it, such as 'Koizumi's excuse (for visiting Yasukuni) makes no sense' (*PD*, 24/06/2005), 'Koizumi's visit is a challenge to human conscience and international justice' (*PD*, 18/10/2005), and 'Koizumi is drowning in the Yasukuni dispute' (*PD*, 06/07/2006). In particular, the *People's Daily* used the phrase 'worshipping the demon' (*baigui*) to describe Koizumi's and other politicians' visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. For instance, in January 2004, an editorial was titled 'Brazenly worshipping the demon and distorting war history—Koizumi is playing a dangerous game' (*PD*, 07/01/2004). Because the CCP has claimed it is a Marxist, anti-theism party, it has theoretically repudiated any expression of 'ghost' (*guihun*) or 'spirit' (*linghun*). However, as the most comprehensive, official newspaper, the word 'demon' (*gui*) was used repeatedly to refer to the war criminals of the Second Sino-Japanese War who were honoured in the Yasukuni Shrine. This emotional expression reflected the strong dissatisfaction of the Chinese government, the public and the media toward the visits by high-level Japanese officials.

In reporting the Yasukuni controversy, the *People's Daily* frequently cited foreign countries' comments and critiques on this issue, which described Koizumi's visit as a 'global problem' (*PD*, 23/05/2006) and emphasized that the international community was on China's side. For instance, some articles reported that 'the New York Times criticizes Japanese Foreign Minister has poisoned good-neighbourly relations' (*PD*, 14/02/2006), and 'Mr. Annan calls on Japan to envisage the history of the Second World War' (*PD*, 12/05/2006). It also stressed

the domestic opposition from the Japanese opposition party, civil groups, the media and ordinary people. Many articles used titles, such as ‘the leader of the Japanese Komeito Party asks Junichiro to stop visiting Yasukuni’ (PD, 26/05/2005), ‘more than half of Japanese citizens against Prime Minister’s (Koizumi) visit to Yasukuni’ (PD, 25/07/2006), ‘Japanese philosopher Takahashi suggests the Yasukuni Shrine is the device of war mobilization’ (PD, 21/08/2006). By reporting international and domestic rejection of Koizumi’s visit, the *People’s Daily* tried to define Koizumi and other Japanese politicians’ visits as the behaviour of a few right-wing politicians, which did not represent the international settlement of the Second Sino-Japanese War or the overall attitude of Japanese society towards China.

In addition to the Yasukuni dispute, the Japanese domestic history textbook issue was another hot topic during Koizumi’s tenure. The *People’s Daily* labelled the Japanese *New History Textbook*, which was approved by the Japanese Education Ministry in 2005, as a ‘right-wing history textbook’ (*youyi jiaokeshu*), and accused it of trying to downplay the historical facts of Japan’s aggression during the Second World War as well as the suffering that the Japanese militarism inflicted on its Asian neighbours. The *People’s Daily* used the words ‘distorting the history facts’ (*waiqu shishi*), ‘the more one tries to hide, the more one is exposed’ (*yugai mizhang*), and ‘unsatisfactory’ (*bude renxin*), and concluded that the *New History Textbook* was doomed to failure (PD, 12/04/2005, 08/10/2005).

During this period, contemporary confrontations between China and Japan rarely appeared in the *People’s Daily*. The contemporary conflict frames mainly focused on the Chinese or Japanese companies’ exploitation of oil and gas resources in the East China Sea (PD, 08/07/2004; 14/04/2005; 10/03/2006). However, the news reports of this issue usually held a constructive approach by reporting the facts and not relating it to the more sensitive sovereignty dispute, and proposed the solution of ‘shelving the controversy to pursue joint development’ (PD, 05/07/2006). According to the *People’s Daily*, the dispute in the East China Sea was not irreconcilable because consensus on it had been reached in the 1970s when China and Japan normalized their relationship and, therefore, it could be solved through diplomatic consultation.

Stage 2. Significant understatement of historical controversies and slight increase of contemporary disputes (September 2006-September 2012)

The configuration of a high frequency of historical conflicts and a low presence of

contemporary disputes changed in September 2006, as the stepping down of Koizumi Junichiro as prime minister offered an opportunity for the improvement of Sino-Japanese relations. Between 2006 and 2012, there were six Japanese prime ministers, each with an average tenure of about one year. However, the rapid leadership changes during this period did not significantly affect the bilateral relationship, due to the will in both countries to improve Sino-Japanese relations (Cheng, 2011).

The analysis revealed that during this period, both historical and contemporary fears discourse remained at a low level, with slightly more articles using the contemporary than the historical themes (see Figure 4.1). This period witnessed a sharp decrease in the number of articles on war history and war-related disputes from the *People's Daily* in the post-Koizumi era (September 2006-2012). Especially in 2008, 2009, and 2011, only six, seven, and eleven stories, respectively, mentioned historical themes in reporting Japan and Sino-Japanese relations. Compared with about 150 news articles per year on Koizumi's premiership and about 250 news articles per year on the Xi Jinping-Shinzo Abe era, these results suggested that the historical themes were dramatically played down during this time. Contemporary conflict was slightly more reported, involving the main topic of the territorial dispute in the East China Sea, which referred not only to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands but also to the exploitation of underwater natural resources.

The 2010 incident of the Senkaku/Diaoyu boat collision seriously challenged the hard-won improvement in Sino-Japanese relations. On September 7, 2010 a Chinese trawler operating in disputed waters collided with the Japanese Coast Guard's patrol boats near the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, and the Japanese Coast Guard arrested the crew. This incident provoked Chinese public protests and led to large-scale, anti-Japanese demonstrations in many Chinese cities (Reilly, 2014). The Chinese crew members were released without charge after the Chinese government's repeated demands, and were able to return home. The *People's Daily* gave a high amount of space to this political crisis through detailed reporting of the Chinese prime minister and the foreign minister strongly condemning Japan's detention of the Chinese crew, and the Chinese government's determined demand of releasing the crew members. However, the content analysis indicated that the focus of the *People's Daily* was on the arrest and detention of the Chinese crew rather than on the Diaoyu/Senkaku territorial dispute. Among 26 articles on the collision, there were only three stories on the sovereignty issue of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. This finding demonstrated that the *People's Daily*

avoided relating this accidental event to a long-standing territorial controversy.

In addition to limiting this event within the theme of ‘arrest or release’, the *People’s Daily* moved quickly to quieten negative and condemning reports after the release of the Chinese crew. The press conference of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, according to the *People’s Daily’s* coverage, claimed that ‘we hope Japan jointly maintains the general situation of Sino-Japanese relations, together with China’ (PD, 02/10/2010). It also emphasized that the overall situation was stable and that bilateral relations were friendly, separating a handful of right-wing Japanese who stirred up trouble from the general Japanese government and society by asserting that ‘the dirty trick of destroying Sino-Japanese relations can not succeed’ (PD, 13/10/2010). Because the anti-Japanese demonstrations took place in response to the collision incident, the *People’s Daily* played the role of smoothing matters over by calling for the public to calm down and ‘rationally expressing our patriotism according to the law’ (PD, 26/10/2010).

In general, the analysis suggested that between 2007 and 2012, under the amiable atmosphere of Sino-Japanese cooperation and friendship, the *People’s Daily* significantly downplayed the political fear discourse regarding Japan to a large extent, as the historical controversies had almost disappeared, and contemporary conflicts were occasionally reported with a bland tone.

Stage 3. The contemporary territorial dispute prevailed among the discourse of geopolitical fears (September 2012-December 2013)

The analysis demonstrated that the equally low frequencies for the coverage of both the historical and contemporary conflict frames ended in September 2012. As the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands dispute in 2012 undermined the 6-year, hard won improvement and friendship between China and Japan, this contemporary territorial conflict overwhelmingly dominated the news coverage of Japan by the *People’s Daily* from September 2012 to the end of 2013. Meanwhile, the historical controversy frame was raised as well but was controlled to within a moderate level.

The Japanese government’s nationalization of the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands was a crucial watershed for Sino-Japanese relations, as well as a focus of attention by the *People’s Daily*. The news coverage of Japan by most Chinese media again became negative. The *People’s Daily* watched this event closely, offering 145 articles about it in 2012 and 136

articles in 2013. After Noda's declaration of nationalization of the islands, the *People's Daily* published 126 articles expressing China's condemnation towards Japan's action and claiming China's sovereignty over Diaoyu/Senkaku. These reports consisted of declarations from various Chinese government departments, including President Hu Jintao, China's Foreign Ministry, the National People's Congress, the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), China's democratic parties, civic groups, and overseas Chinese (*PD*, September, 2012). The *People's Daily* aimed to demonstrate that a 'united front' (*tongyi zhanxian*) on this issue had formed that comprised all levels of Chinese society. China's leadership change in late 2012 did not significantly affect the *People's Daily's* narrative of the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute. Reports that focused on condemning the Japanese government's nationalization, reasserting China's claims of sovereignty over the islands, and urging Japan to correctly deal with territorial issues were the most prominent topics of conveying geopolitical fear from the *People's Daily*.

The number of articles carrying historical controversy frames showed a slight increase in 2012 and 2013, but was generally at a low or moderate level with 24 news articles in 2012 and 60 in 2013. The stories provided historical evidence that supported the Chinese government's sovereignty claims over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, and criticized Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine (e.g. *PD*, 14/03/2013; 15/08/2013; 16/08/2013). In general, between September 2012 and December 2013, while the frame of the contemporary territorial dispute in the East China Sea prevailed the geopolitical fear discourses in the *People's Daily*, news articles of historical controversies between China and Japan were inconspicuous.

Stage 4. The rejuvenation of historical themes in the Xi-Abe era (2014-2015)

The push-pull relations between the geopolitical fear discourse of contemporary conflict and historical controversy returned from 2014. Stories about the territorial disputes in the East China Sea gradually vanished in parallel with the regurgitation of the history of Japan's aggression toward China. While the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute was the hottest topic in Sino-Japanese relations that received enormous media coverage in 2012 and 2013, it became abruptly under-reported in 2014. There were only nine articles that referred to the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute with a routine, notification-style title of 'China coast guard patrol of the Diaoyu and surrounding waters' and very brief content (e.g. *PD*, 03/02/2014, 27/04/2014, 07/08/2014).

Contemporary frames gave way to historical topics. The Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine caused this issue to return to the spotlight. Shinzo Abe was portrayed in friendly terms by the *People's Daily* during his first term because he ended Koizumi's premiership and visited China in 2006. One news article used the sentence 'wise man is in tune with times' to describe his visit to China and his actions to improve Sino-Japanese relations (PD, 08/10/2006). However, after he came to power again in December 2012, a series of adjustments to Japan's security policies proposed by Abe and his repeated visits to the Yasukuni Shrine meant he was recasted by Chinese authorities as a right-wing politician. The news coverage of Abe from the *People's Daily* started to change, becoming uncompromising and strongly worded, with a focus on condemning his right-wing activities and political personality. Some news coverage appeared as a wartime slogan, such as 'we must fight against Shinzo Abe's right-wing government' (PD, 14/02/2014), and 'new guidelines of LDP reveal the threatening nature of Shinzo Abe' (PD, 21/01/2014). One article even used the title of 'The Japanese militarism is Lord Voldemort' (PD, 10/01/2014), in which Abe and the Japanese right-wing were metaphorically referred to as the most evil arch-enemy character in J.K. Rowling's popular series of the *Harry Potter* novels. Numerous adjectives were used to describe Abe's political personality. One story was entitled 'look at Abe's disgracefully political DNA', describing Kishi Nobusuke, Abe's grandfather, as the pioneer of Japan's right-wing forces in the post-war period, and suggesting that Abe had inherited Kishi's militaristic views that destroyed relations between Japan and its Asian neighbors (PD, 02/01/2014). In addition, Abe's economic policy, 'Abenomics', was reported in the *People's Daily* as having failed to save the stagnant Japanese economy (PD, 09/09/2014).

Although the unsettled historical disagreements and currently territorial confrontations have co-existed for several decades and jointly constituted the geopolitical fear discourse, there has been an obvious alternation in the Chinese official media, the *People's Daily's* coverage of Japan. The switch between historical and contemporary themes from the *People's Daily* largely depended on the changes in Sino-Japanese relations and the Chinese government's policies and attitudes toward Japan under different political contexts. However, the findings showed that the *People's Daily* dramatically understated historical controversies when contemporary disputes came to the fore, and vice versa. It seldom stressed the two themes simultaneously, which suggests that the *People's Daily* did not convey a complete

incompatibility between China and Japan. When employing the geopolitical fear narrative to report Sino-Japanese relations, the *People's Daily* used a case-by-case approach which prevented the news on Japan from being too antagonistic. By doing that, the *People's Daily* aimed to illustrate that Sino-Japanese conflicts, despite their long-term existence and recently exacerbation, are under a manageable level, and the public should trust the Chinese government to have ability to solve this problem.

4.2.2 The International Image of Japan—A Dangerous Player in Regional and Global Affairs

In addition to topics of Sino-Japanese conflicts (both historical and contemporary ones), which limited the narratives and emotions of fear, victimization and dissatisfaction regarding Japan within a bilateral level, the *People's Daily* also extended the geopolitical fear discourse to regional and international scopes through reporting Japan's ambitious engagement in Asian and global affairs. It framed Japan as not only a threat and rival of China, but also a dangerous player imperilling the peace and stability of Asia-pacific region, and even the world. Japan's international image was framed by the *People's Daily* mainly through news coverage on four dimensions of Japan's bilateral relations with other countries that were mostly with the US, and South Korea (36.1%, $n = 280$, and 26.9%, $n = 208$, respectively), and approximately 20% on Japan's relations with North Korea and Russia (13.5%, $n=105$, and 6.3%, $n=49$ respectively). In addition, a smaller percentage (17.2%, $n=134$) of reports mentioned Japanese activities in global affairs in general terms, and its interactions with countries in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Europe. Overall, stories on Japan's interactions with other countries showed a suspicious and dissenting attitude by the *People's Daily*, conveying the discourse of geopolitical fear. Japan was portrayed as an ambitious, but disfavoured participant in Asian and global affairs.

US-Japan relations were covered by the *People's Daily* chiefly in relation to Japan's bilateral relations (36%, $n=280$) during 2001-2015, partly because of the geopolitical significance of US-Japan relations both to Japan and China. Because the post-war Japanese constitution renounced its right to wage war, Japan has been under the U.S.'s military protection for 70 years. However, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sought to turn Japan into a 'normal country'. In turn, the most significant objective for his administration became the conclusion of its dependence on the US (DiFilippo, 2015; Takahashi, 2014). In this political context, the *People's Daily's* news coverage of Japan-US relations focused on two topics involving

US-Japan joint military activities that aroused China's concern, and the increasingly prominent confrontations between the US and Japan. On the one hand, the deepening US-Japanese cooperation on security in areas such as joint military drills and arms sales was viewed as specifically targeting China (for instance, *PD*, 29/03/2013, 27/03/2014). On the other hand, the military alliance was seen to involve serious disagreements and damage to Japan-US relations because of the unsolved relocation of the US military base in Futenma, and the human rights violations committed by US forces in Japan (*PD*, 13/11/2009, 26/01/2010). This led to a paradoxical situation in which Japan-US relations oscillated between their traditional strong political/military alignment and an intrinsic disagreement within this relationship.

The focus on the Japan-US joint military activities represented a typical discourse of threat in the post-war period, whereas Japan was portrayed in the *People's Daily* as very restless and eager to move beyond its military and security dependence on the US. Both discursive characteristics of Japan-US relations—the strengthening of Japan-US military ties and the resurgence of militarism in Japan—intensified the old fears related to Japan and its aggression towards China. It also suggested that Japan was moving away from either a state of regional peace in post-war East Asia or the status quo of its protective relationship with the US.

As important neighbours and trade partners, Japanese-South Korean relations were the second most covered bilateral relations in the *People's Daily* (26.8%). These relations were reported as usually entangled in historical controversies and contemporary territorial confrontations. The coverage frequently described South Korea's proactive efforts in attempting to settle historical disputes with Japan, whether state-oriented or non-governmental. This included sharply criticizing Japanese politicians' controversial speeches regarding war-related history and other acts that threatened the peace of Northeast Asia (*PD*, 12/07/2006), a protest against Japan's approval of a right-wing history textbook (*PD*, 10/05/2007), holding exhibitions to reveal the suffering of sex slaves in Japan's aggression toward Asia (*PD*, 03/03/2014), and civil claims for war compensation from the Japanese government (*PD*, 19/01/2005). The selection and traumatization of particular historical memories or imaginations were themselves a political move that reinforced the boundaries between a victimized 'us' and an evil 'other'. In 2012 and 2013, when Sino-Japanese relations were seriously strained because of the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute, reporting of the Japan-South Korean territorial controversy regularly appeared in the *People's Daily*, including a story about the South Korean president's

landing on the Liancourt Rocks (*PD*, 11/08/2012), and its setting up a monument on the controversial island (*PD*, 20/08/2012), which reinforced the geopolitical belief that Japan had been, and would continue to be, a regional, if not global, threat. A similar discursive construction also applied to the bilateral relations between Japan and North Korea in the *People's Daily* between 2001 and 2015 (the third most covered theme at 13.5%).

The *People's Daily's* representation of Japan as an international/regional threat, was not only expressed in coverage on Japan's relations with the Koreans, but also with Russia, with whom, it suggested, Japan often had trouble because of territorial disputes. In reporting Japanese-Russian relations and the conflict over the Kuril Islands, the *People's Daily* held a perceptible bias towards Russia's position, despite trying to report this issue neutrally. For instance, one story covered the shooting incident in the Kuril Islands' surrounding waters in which a Japanese sailor was killed. It clearly stated that it was the Japanese government's proactive foreign policy and a series of military actions abroad that had severely hindered the improvement of Russian-Japanese relations (*PD*, 21/08/2006).

By reporting other countries' common rejection and dissatisfaction with Japan, the *People's Daily* portrayed Japan as a country that did not face up to its past aggression and had territorial ambitions. In general, Japan's international political sphere appeared to be framed in a very negative way, as chaotic, irresponsible and unethical. As such, the discourse of fear was geopolitically inscribed into the political framing of Japan in the sense that Japan became a regional, if not global, threat.

4.2.3 The Instability and Militarization in Japan's Domestic Politics

The key themes embedded in the news coverage of Japanese domestic politics were of turbulence and militarization. Between 2006 and 2012, there were six Japanese prime ministers, each having an average tenure of about one year. The *People's Daily* covered such rapid leadership changes during this period, framing Japan as lacking a powerful and stable government, which was seen as seriously affecting the consistency of its government policy. In addition, the *People's Daily* frequently reported the strong contradictions between the Japanese ruling and opposition parties, as well as factional politics within the ruling party, suggesting that elite consensus was difficult to achieve and that the government's authority had been damaged (the *People's Daily*, 07/08/2006; 31/07/2009; 08/08/2012), therefore adding to a sense of political instability, turbulence and chaos.

Another key topic closely related to the discourse of Japan's domestic instability and foreign conflicts with other countries was on militarization, which included reference to Japan's adjustment of its security policies, such as the revision of Article 9 of the *Japanese Constitution* and the *White Paper on Japan's Security Policy*. The *People's Daily* often related Japan's security adjustments to its past militarism (see the *People's Daily* 18/01/2007; 18/11/2011; 01/08/2012; 27/03/2012; 15/02/2013; 29/08/2013), reminding audiences that not only Japan's Asian neighbours, but also the international community should stay vigilant, considering the resuscitation of right-wing militarism in Japan. In the news articles, there was a strong discourse of geopolitical fear related to the military actions of Japan, both framed as a continuous existential threat to the stability and development of the region. Having focused on the (re)militarization of Japan, this securitized image of Japan was framed in the geopolitical discourse of the *People's Daily* as a threatening, dangerous and fearful other. The military actions of Japan were also inscribed in what we termed an 'aggressive and backward-looking progress': for many East Asian countries and Russia, the (re)militarization of Japan was seen as a form of aggression, and a symbol of Japan's backward retreat into its militarist past. This backward-looking and aggressive image also included a sense of progress for Japan, as Japan had gradually loosened the international constraints on its military operations, turning it into a 'normal country' ('normal' in the sense of, for example, no longer being constrained by the obligations and special conditions prescribed for Japan in the peace agreement of WWII) and, thus, moving toward a possible return to geopolitical domination in East Asia. Therefore, through the discourse(s) of (re)militarization and security, the image of Japan was constructed mainly by the discourse of geopolitical fear in a subtle reconstruction of time(s) of moving backward and forward between the return to a militarist past and the making of a new geopolitical order in East Asia.

News reports about Japan's military and security issues contained the most negative themes relating to Japanese domestic affairs, and these were usually framed by fearful language such as 'military expansion', 'threat' and 'militaristic action'. In particular, China's official media was very sensitive about Japan's military adjustments and actions, considering the decade-long antagonistic sentiments and the contemporary territorial disputes. Therefore, the *People's Daily* usually conveyed a vigilant and condemnatory tone in reporting Japan's military policies and actions. Its coverage, including pronouncements such as 'Japan violates the three principles of arms export' (the *People's Daily*, 19/12/2012), framed the series of

Japanese military adjustments as not only affecting Sino-Japanese relations but also as posing a threat to the whole Asia-Pacific region. The discourse of fear and threat in the forms of aggression and backward-looking perspective (in its militarist tradition) appeared, or were interpreted and reinforced around the (re-)militarization and securitization of Japan.

4.3 Discourses of Geoeconomic Hopes: Sino-Japanese Cooperation and Japan's Domestic Achievement

Although the discourses of geopolitical fear were embedded in the coverage of Sino-Japanese bilateral confrontations, Japan's international engagements and its domestic political instability and militarization, the conflict-oriented narratives were never the whole pictures of the *People's Daily's* representation of Japan. As China and Japan's economies have been increasingly integrated into regionalized and globalized markets, the traditional discursive strategies of geopolitics which focused on territorial security, have been supplemented by discourse of geoeconomic hope which emphasized the reciprocity and interdependence of Sino-Japanese relations. The *People's Daily* adopted a geoeconomic hope discourse when covering Sino-Japanese official cooperation, people-to-people friendship, as well as Japanese domestic society and economy. By doing that, it portrayed Japan as China's complementary partner, old friend with centuries-long exchanges, and worth learning paragon on various domestic matters.

4.3.1 The Official Contacts between Chinese and Japanese Governments

According to the *People's Daily* (e.g. 03/09/2008, 23/05/2011, 25/12/2014), seeking stable and improved bilateral relations was in accordance with the common interests of China and Japan. Therefore, governmental contacts and cooperation were significant theme of geoeconomic hope discourse throughout the 15 years between 2001 and 2015. Official contacts were frequently reported with a confident and approving tone. Three important topics were exchanges of leaders' visits, East Asian cooperation between China, Japan and South Korea, and mutual help in tackling natural disasters.

From 'journeys for breaking the ice' to 'warm spring trip'

In October 2006, Koizumi's successor, Abe Shinzo, made his first trip to China as prime minister and spoke highly of the Sino-Japanese friendship, as well as the significance of Asian cooperation. The *People's Daily* welcomed Abe's visit and called it 'journeys for

breaking the ice' (*pobing zhi lu*) (05/10/2006). One news article used the sentence 'wise man is in tune with times' to describe his visit to China and his actions of improving Sino-Japanese relations (*PD*, 08/10/2006).

In the spring of 2007, the then Chinese Prime Minister, Wen Jiabao, paid a state visit to Japan, which was portrayed as 'journeys for melting the ice' (*rongbing zhi lu*) (*PD*, 15/04/2007). Compared with the word 'journeys for breaking the ice' which was used during Shinzo Abe's visit to China in 2006, 'melting the ice' had an implication that the political 'weather' of bilateral relations had become warm enough to alleviate the misunderstanding rooted in the two nations. The metaphor of 'melting the ice' showed that Sino-Japanese relations had entered onto a more friendly, cooperative, and constructive path.

A year later, on 6th May, 2008, Chinese President, Hu Jintao, arrived in Tokyo to begin a state visit to Japan, which was an historical moment, being 16 years since Hu's predecessor Jiang Zemin's visit to Japan. The *People's Daily* gave a large amount of attention to this political event and portrayed it as a 'warm spring trip' (*nuanchun zhi lu*) (*PD*, 06/05/2008). The triple-jump-style expression used by the *People's Daily*, from Shinzo Abe's 'journeys for breaking the ice' to Wen Jiabao's 'journeys for melting the ice' and further to Hu Jintao's 'warm spring trip', conveyed a meaning of geoeconomic hope and implied that the 'cold winter' of Sino-Japanese relations was past and bilateral relations had entered a stable and progressive stage. The *People's Daily* positively evaluated the conclusion of the *Joint Statement between Japan and China on Comprehensive Promotion of a 'Mutually Beneficial Relationship Based on Common Strategic Interests'* during Hu's visit, suggesting it was the fourth crucially important joint statement on Sino-Japanese relations and put the bilateral relations on a new track of comprehensive cooperation (*PD*, 09/05/2008). Three leaders' visits between China and Japan significantly improved the bilateral relations, which paved the way for further East Asian cooperation and integration.

The *People's Daily's* intensive coverage of exchanges of leaders' visits should be considered with reference to the Chinese 2005 anti-Japanese demonstrations, which were invoked by the Japanese government's approval of the controversial historical textbook and its bid for permanent membership on the UNSC (Stockmann, 2010). The large-scale, bottom-up, and peaceful-turned-violent protests reminded the Chinese government of the potential risks of the anti-Japanese sentiments prevailing in Chinese society, including reducing the chances of

reaching a diplomatic compromise with Japan and resulting in social and political instability (Reilly, 2013; Shirk, 2011; Tang & Darr, 2012). Therefore, the *People's Daily* as China's official voice, warmly embraced the topic of Sino-Japanese exchanges of leaders' visits, promoted the positive and cooperative side of China-Japan relations, as well as disseminated the sense of hope regarding the vulnerable bilateral relations and the wider East Asian region.

Asian Cooperation between China, Japan and South Korea

Due to the war-related controversies, Japan-China and Japan-South Korea relations did not reach a real national reconciliation, which significantly prevented regional cooperation and integration in East Asia. However, the efforts of building trust and deepening cooperation between China, Japan and South Korea have been sought for several decades. Some remarkable achievements on this issue were regularly reported by the *People's Daily* including the China-Japan-South Korea trilateral summits and ministerial-level meetings, which suggested a sense of hope and optimism towards constructive and reciprocal inter-nation relations in East Asia.

The annual China-Japan-South Korea trilateral summit has been held six times since 2008 between these three major countries in East Asia, with a focus on maintaining strong trilateral relations, developing the regional economy and disaster relief. The *People's Daily* watched the summits closely and cited the comments of the three countries' leaders, suggesting that stability and cooperation between China, Japan and South Korea were in line with the public interest of the three countries, as well as forming the basis of the Asian-Pacific region's peace and prosperity (*PD*, 31/05/2010). It also affirmatively evaluated the agreements and consensus of the summits, including setting up the secretariat of China-Japan-South Korea cooperation (*PD*, 31/05/2010), establishing cooperation and communication systems for nuclear power safety between China-Japan-South Korea (*PD*, 19/05/2011), and the conclusion of the China-Japan-Korea trilateral investment agreement (*PD*, 14/05/2012). While the trilateral summit discusses broad issues of cooperation, the ministerial-level meetings focus on more specific sectors and issues.

Ministerial-level meetings among the three countries in the field of environment, health, tourism, media, economy and trade were repeatedly mentioned in the *People's Daily*, which illustrated the existence and expansion of common interests as well as common responsibility among East Asian nations (*PD*, 15/06/2009; 26/10/2009; 24/11/2009). The environmental

field is one of the most closely cooperative among East Asian countries since China, Japan and South Korea share common airspace and waters, and therefore, face common problems. The tri-parties environment ministers meeting have been held annually since 1999. The *People's Daily* actively covered the meetings, speaking highly of the efforts paid by the three countries, and positively evaluating the consensus reached, including control of sandstorms in Northwest China (*PD*, 05/12/2007), governance of trans-boundary air pollution such as dust (*PD*, 07/05/2012), and the adoption of the 'Tri-parties Joint Action Plan on Environmental Cooperation' (*PD*, 25/05/2010),

The commerce and trade sectors have also been highly interactive among China, Japan and South Korea. The *People's Daily* often stressed the complementarity and reciprocity of the three countries' economies, and reviewed in detail the trilateral meetings of trade ministers. The Sino-Japan-Korea free trade zone, as the focal point of trade ministers' meetings in recent years, became an often-reported concept by the *People's Daily*, which is familiar to the Chinese public (*PD*, 26/10/2009, 24/05/2010). Trilateral cooperation in culture, tourism and health received the *People's Daily's* attention as well. For instance, it reported that the meeting of tourism ministers between China-Japan-South Korea concluded the *Declaration of Hokkaido* in 2006, which aimed at expanding tourism cooperation and enhancing personnel exchanges between the three countries (*PD*, 05/07/2006). It also introduced the cultural ministers' meeting among the three countries, which suggested that cultural exchanges should play the roles of a 'lubricant' for building mutual trust, an 'helper' of commerce and trade, and a 'conveyor belt' of enhancing people's feeling towards others (*PD*, 01/12/2012).

By employing geoeconomic hope discourse which covering the trilateral dialogue and cooperation among China, Japan and South Korea, the *People's Daily* emphasized the common interests and challenges of the East Asian community, conveying a clear message that China and Japan were neighbours and partners rather than rivals or enemies. Under this cooperative and all-win atmosphere, the mutual assistance of China and Japan of each other in tackling natural disasters further improved Sino-Japanese relations and people-to-people friendship.

The Wenchuan earthquake and the 3/11 earthquake in Japan — 'An emotionally inseparable and reciprocal relation of Asia'

Massive earthquakes took place in China (2008) and Japan (2011) were natural disasters, but

were also used as the discourse of geoeconomic hope so as to highlight the bilateral friendship and collaboration. Only one day after Hu Jintao ended his state visit to Japan and returned to Beijing, a deadly earthquake occurred in northwest China, which is known as the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake that killed 69,197 people (Du et al., 2015). During this catastrophe, Japan's timely rescue efforts and munificent monetary aid was repeatedly reported and stressed in the *People's Daily*, framing Japan as a charitable and humanitarian nation whose government and people held sympathetic and friendly feelings toward the Chinese victims. Many stories reported the Japanese rescue team's impressive actions in the quake zone, such as Japanese doctors working hard on the front lines (*PD*, 23/05/2008), Japanese rescue members stating they would not give up hope in saving people (*PD*, 19/05/2008), and the whole Japanese society enthusiastically donating to China's disaster areas (*PD*, 26/05/2008). In addition, the *People's Daily* reported Japan as being very well prepared to deal with earthquakes or tsunamis, stressing that China should learn from Japan's experiences and strengthen cooperation with Japan on disaster relief work (*PD*, 27/07/2008).

While the *People's Daily's* coverage of Japan's help in Wenchuan earthquake was framed as further consolidation of China-Japan relations in the context of stable and improved bilateral relations, China's disaster relief efforts in Japan's 3/11 Tohoku earthquake in 2011 played the role of changing the subject from territorial disputes back to the theme of describing Sino-Japanese cooperation and friendship. The 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, and the Fukushima nuclear leak, became the most important topics in the *People's Daily's* reports on Japan, which helped the Chinese government to play down the Senkaku/Diaoyu boat collision incident. On 11th March, 2011, an underwater earthquake of magnitude 9.0 occurred off the coast of Japan which killed 15,894 people (Rose, 2015). It was the most powerful earthquake ever recorded to have hit Japan, and the fourth most powerful earthquake in the world ever recorded in history. The earthquake and subsequent tsunami resulted in a serious energy accident at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant. The tsunami destroyed the emergency generators cooling the reactors, causing reactor 4 to overheat from the decay heat from the fuel rods. The insufficient cooling led to three nuclear meltdowns and the release of radioactive material beginning on 12th March 2011. Several hydrogen-air chemical explosions occurred between 12th March and 15th March (Du et al., 2015; Rose, 2015).

The series of disasters inflicted heavy losses on Japan, which attracted vast media coverage around the world. It should be mentioned that in reporting China's help to Japan, the *People's*

Daily integrated the politically cooperative theme with the non-governmental exchange theme, which aimed to highlight that the whole Chinese society, from ordinary people to businessmen to the nation's president were helping Japan in their disaster relief efforts. It reported the Chinese leadership's concern and government's help to Japanese disaster areas, such as 'Prime Minister Wen Jiabao visited victims of 311 earthquake' (*PD*, 22/05/2011), and Chinese companies' help to Japan, such as 'China Southern Airlines delivered disaster relief supplies to Japan' (*PD*, 18/03/2011), as well as Chinese people's sympathy and warmth to Japanese victims of the earthquake and tsunami. The *People's Daily* adopted a commiserative tone when covering Japan's suffering and affetto style in describing China's help to Japan. One article was titled 'an emotionally inseparable and reciprocal relation of Asia' (*PD*, 21/03/2011) and explained that the unprecedented exchanges of capital, population and production in Asia had brought the people's feelings closer and cultivated a consciousness of caring for each other, especially between China and Japan. Just like the news coverage of Japan during the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, China and Japan were reported by the *People's Daily* as good friends who put controversy aside and helped each other with every effort when facing natural disasters.

4.3.2 People-to-People Exchanges form the Solid Foundation of Bilateral Friendship

The official contacts and cooperation between the two nations, as a crucial discourse of geoeconomic hope, highlighted the economic and societal interdependence from a state-level but also were highly dependent on the fluctuations of Sino-Japanese relations. During the period of political conflict between China and Japan, the news articles on such governmental contacts were dramatically decreased, or even disappeared. However, the theme of people-to-people exchanges, as a different form of geoeconomic hope from grassroots perspective, showed a relatively steady presence in the articles of the *People's Daily*. News articles of people-to-people exchanges held a positive stance, and these were supplemented for articles on governmental cooperation during times of peace in Sino-Japanese relations, and as an equalizer to balance the negative and condemning stories on Japan in bilateral political crises.

The topics of people-to-people exchanges from the *People's Daily* were diverse, including historically friendly communication and contemporary civilian interactions. Sino-Japanese friendship in the historical context usually focused on two periods of China's Sui and Tang dynasties (around 600 AD) and the 1970-80s. Because China and Japan were friendly

neighbours in ancient times, Sino-Japanese cultural exchanges have occurred for more than two thousand years. Because China's feudal civilization reached its peak in Sui and Tang dynasties, the cultural exchanges between China and Japan were very frequent, resulting in masses of Japanese came to China to learn from the Chinese political system and culture, and some Chinese went to Japan and introduced Confucian ideas, philosophies, Buddhism, character and the arts. The *People's Daily* actively reviewed these historical exchanges and key figures, such as the Japanese missions to Tang China (*qiantangshi*) (*PD*, 25/04/2007, 16/04/2008), and Monk Jian's visit to Japan (Jianzhen was a Chinese Monk who introduced Buddhism to Japan in 754 AD) (*PD*, 11/05/2008). Through the retrospective discussion of Sino-Japanese historical exchanges, the *People's Daily* used the word 'affection lasts a thousand years' (*qing chuan qianzai*) to illustrate that the China-Japan friendship had a millennium-long history and a solid public base in the two countries. However, in another aspect, the *People's Daily's* narratives implicitly contained a sense of superiority because of China's cultural exports to Japan in ancient times.

While news coverage of exchanges that occurred in ancient times was aimed at showing a long history of Sino-Japanese friendship, stories of communication and interactions that took place in the 1970 and 1980s demonstrated that China and Japan were capable of overcoming war-related controversies and rebuilding mutual trust. Since China and Japan resumed their diplomatic relations in 1978, the 1980s witnessed a 10-year 'honeymoon' of bilateral relations with numerous civilian contacts in economic, cultural and social fields. The *People's Daily* labelled people in the two countries who engaged in those exchanges as 'friendly personage', reporting their activities of disseminating cultures and improving the public's feelings toward each other. For instance, one article was entitled 'endless friendship between China and Japan' which reviewed the Sino-Japanese Youth Party held in Beijing in 1984, suggesting that this party had cultivated a large number of young people who devoted themselves to facilitating Sino-Japanese friendship and cooperation (*PD*, 17/06/2007). It also mentioned some Japanese artists, painters, and singers who deeply loved China and Chinese culture and actively promoted the two countries' cultural exchanges, such as Ikuo Hirayama who had visited China 150 times (*PD*, 08/12/2009), and Masashi Sada who, in the 1980's, was the first foreign singer to hold a concert in China (*PD*, 03/07/2009).

The contemporary people-to-people exchanges between China and Japan mainly reported the benign interactions of the two countries' young people and the attractiveness to each other of

Chinese and Japanese arts and culture. The Sino-Japan Youth Friendship Exchange Year (2008) was a bright spark in the *People's Daily's* coverage. The aim of this Exchange Year was to deepen mutual understanding and strengthen friendship between the Japanese and Chinese young people mainly through inviting youths to visit each other's countries. According to the *People's Daily*, leadership in the two nations attached great importance on this project, attending and addressing the opening and closing ceremonies. The *People's Daily* covered this issue with a praising tone. One article's title was 'gathering in this promising spring' (PD, 16/03/2008), another was entitled 'beautiful youth and true friendship—President Hu Jintao attended the exchange activities of Chinese and Japanese young people' (PD, 09/05/2008). The *People's Daily* showed that through a series of interchange activities, the good will and favourable sentiments toward each other's nation had been cultivated among Chinese and Japanese youths.

Cultural attractiveness has been an important driving force for cultural exchanges between China and Japan, as well as an incentive of geoeconomic hope. Since the two countries have been deeply influenced by the Confucian ideology and geographical proximity, China and Japan have shared many similar traditions, customs, artistic forms, and values, which have enabled each other's culture to be easily understood. However, there are distinctive differences between the two countries' cultures due to Japan's integration into Western society and capitalism as well as China's abundant historical tourist resources and complicated ethnic situation. This combination of cultural similarity and dissimilarity has resulted in great attractiveness between the two countries. Numerous articles reported the popularity of each other's cultures and arts, such as Chinese Kun opera, the *Peony Pavilion*, performed in public in Japan that received high praise (PD, 08/01/2008), China and Japan jointly performed the Chinese legend, *Mulan Enlist*, by mixing Japanese gagaku (a kind of Japanese palace music) and pop music together (PD, 27/04/2012), the Sino-Japanese exchange conference of shadow boxing attracted thousands of Japanese (PD, 22/05/2007). By reporting cultural exchanges between China and Japan, the *People's Daily* suggested that these non-governmental contacts and communication made a significant contribution to enhance mutual trust and improve people's positive feelings toward each other (PD, 27/11/2006).

4.3.3 The Domestic Image of Japan— A Sustainable, Energetic and Innovative Society

The image of Japanese domestic society presented in the *People's Daily's* reports was, to a

large extent, the product of the newspaper's framing of events through the discourse of geoeconomic hope. The language of modernization has been one of the most influential and persistent discourses in China's contemporary politics. From socio-economic and technological perspectives, Japan is a modernized society that embraced modernization and industrialization long before China was temporally 'progressed' (modernized and industrialized). Indeed, it could be argued that Japan came to be viewed as a role model by China, the sort of country that China has been driven to become. This view is significant because it adds a sense of hope or progression, to the perceived societal advancement of Japan in media representation, which was perhaps nowhere clearer than in the examined Chinese media reports related to new medical breakthroughs, cultural integration and technological renovation in Japan.

Among various aspects of Japanese domestic society, its innovation capability was emphasized the most in *the People's Daily's* reports. It portrayed Japan as being energetically engaged in the research and development of technological products that might help people to live more convenient and efficient lives. News stories reported, for instance, that 'Japan invented a robot that can swim like a snake' (*PD*, 06/03/2005), and 'Japan developed the highest speed camera' (*PD*, 12/08/2014). It also described Japan as being devoted to medical research in order to improve the physical and mental health of its citizens, with many stories mentioning its medical discoveries and achievements; for example: 'Japanese research suggested smoking increases suicide rates' (*PD*, 20/01/2005), and 'Japan develops the technology for making bone regeneration' (*PD*, 02/07/2012).

The second most prominently reported topic on Japanese domestic society concerned its culture and history. The *People's Daily* portrayed Japan as a culturally attractive country where traditional, modern, pop and classic, Asian-indigenous and Western-imported cultures have been well integrated. Among many elements of Japanese culture, manga was introduced to China in the 1980s and gained considerable popularity. It is worth noting that some Japanese manga were reworked Chinese legends, such as the widely known *Dragon Ball*, which is based on the classic Chinese literary tale, *Journey to the West*. Therefore, the *People's Daily* often chose Japanese manga as a symbol to illustrate the influence of Sino-Japanese cultural exchanges between each nation. For example, one story 'Astro Boy and Sun Wukong' covered Chinese and Japanese cartoonists' interactions (*PD*, 06/04/2012).

The emphasis on environmental protection and energy conservation was another important feature, comprising 11% of the *People's Daily's* news stories on Japanese domestic society. Many articles explored Japan's efforts to promote a recycling economy, for instance, 'Japan successfully developed bioplastics' (*PD*, 15/09/2011), and 'Japan worked out the draft plan of a low carbon society campaign' (*PD*, 28/07/2008). The *People's Daily* praised Japan's environmental consciousness and pointed out that China should learn from Japan in this regard, as China faced severe environmental deterioration and an energy shortage.

The fourth most prominent topic was on the innovation-centered enterprise culture of Japanese companies. Due to the high penetration of Japanese products into China, some Japanese conglomerates, such as Sony, Toyota and Honda became the subject of the *People's Daily's* attention, and were described as attaching great importance to technological innovation in order to compete internationally. For instance, the paper wrote that 'Fuji launched the world's first 3D digital camera' (*PD*, 24/07/2009) and 'Panasonic develops new methanol fuel battery' (*PD*, 21/10/2008). It proposed that Chinese companies should draw lessons from this enterprise culture of innovation, since China was viewed as the 'world's factory' but lacked original brands or products.

The *People's Daily* reported that Japan was very well prepared to deal with natural disasters. It covered and spoke highly of the Japanese government's efforts in disaster management, stressing that China should learn from Japan's experiences and strengthen cooperation with it on disaster relief work (*PD*, 27/07/2008). In addition, its reports suggested that because China and Japan shared many cultural and social similarities, Japan's successful government initiatives in education, healthcare, the housing market, the aging population and anti-corruption had great significance for the Chinese government (e.g. *PD*, 18/02/2005; 05/08/2010; 02/07/2013).

In general, the most prominent coverage of Japanese domestic social affairs, which comprised articles on Japanese society, its science and technology, environment, culture, education, and health system, were stable in terms of their frequency and stance over the 15-year study period. There were approximately 60-80 news articles each year in the *People's Daily* that discussed Japanese society, and conveyed an amicable and moderate tone, portraying Japan as innovative in science and technology, environmentally friendly, strong in energy conservation, and a culturally attractive country. From socio-economic and technological perspectives,

Japan is a modernized society that embraced modernization and industrialization long before China. In *People's Daily's* coverage, Japan came to be viewed as a role model—the sort of country that China has been driven to become. Therefore, the stories about a progressive Japanese domestic society manufactured a sense of hope and progression, albeit only sustained in and geographically restricted to the domestic, socio-economic sphere of Japan that represented a territorially bounded discourse of socio-economic hope. The narrative of geographically restricted ‘hope’ could also be found in Chinese media’s reporting of the United States—showing a ‘two Americas’ principle: one represented by the hegemonic government and the other represented by the advanced domestic society (Lee, 2003).

4.4 The Official Media as the Monopolistic ‘Actor’—Setting the Theme and Delimitating the Boundary of China’s Political Communication Space

The findings of content analysis demonstrated that the framing of Japan by the *People's Daily* was produced and rearticulated by the combinations of, and changes in, different geo-strategic discourses of ‘geopolitical fears’ and ‘gloeconomic hopes’. The last section of this chapter investigates the role and function of China’s official media in China’s political communication space. It suggested through the alignment and balance of the discourses of geopolitical fears and gloeconomic hopes, the monopolistic position of Chinese official media has embodied two aspects of China’s political communication space, namely setting its key theme of ‘emphasizing the CCP’s contribution and legitimacy’ and delimiting its boundary of ‘maintaining social stability’.

The analysis findings provide empirical verifications for the argument that China’s propaganda mechanism has transformed from banning as much unfavourable information as possible, to what the officials call ‘dredging and blocking’ (*shudu jiehe*, which refers to a combination of guiding public opinion and banning news reports), from the perspective of official media’s narration of foreign relations. To be specific, on the ‘positive’ side of opinion guidance and ideology promotion, the *People's Daily* employed the discourse of geopolitical fears which reporting on Sino-Japanese conflicts and Japan’s aggressively international ambition, so as to insert themes of ‘emphasizing the CCP’s contribution to the Chinese nation and strengthening its legitimacy’ to China’s communication space for other media participants’ absorption. By contrast, on the ‘negative’ side of restraining or preventing undesirable information from public agenda, the *People's Daily* utilized the discourse of gloeconomic hope which covering bilateral cooperation and region peace, in order to

de-radicalize Chinese people's antagonistic sentiments towards Japan and stabilize Sino-Japanese relations, and ultimately, delimitate the boundary of 'maintaining social stability' for China's political communication sphere.

4.4.1 Setting Key Theme of 'Emphasizing the CCP's Contribution and legitimacy'

The CCP's contribution in the process of China's national independence has been the key theme of China's official media's narratives regarding Japan, and has been inserted to China's political communication space. As the state-sponsored communist ideology collapsed in China in the late 1980s, from then, the CCP's legitimacy has been closely associated with its sacrifice in resisting foreign invasion and leadership in nation-building (Callahan, 2017; Wang, 2014). Therefore, the themes of praising the CCP's contribution to the nation and strengthening its legitimacy have been embodied in the official media discourse of Sino-Japanese war throughout the 15 years between 2001 and 2015. Particularly, this thesis finds that during China's domestically significant political events in 2007 and 2014, this theme has been significantly raised.

The 2007 paradox

It seemed paradoxical that in 2007, when the general atmosphere of the Sino-Japanese relations was very positive, stories about the Second Sino-Japanese War frequently appeared in the *People's Daily*. Analysis of these articles showed that their nature and emphasis were illustrating the CCP's leadership in the war rather than condemning the Japanese military's atrocities. Titles of these articles were usually directly linked to the event itself and avoided mentioning 'Japanese militarism', 'Japan's troops', or 'aggression'. For instance, some titles of stories were 'Rescue in Hong Kong' (*PD*, 05/04/2007), 'Guangyang ambush' (*PD*, 04/03/2007), and 'Night combat in Yangmingpu airport' (*PD*, 28/02/2007). News coverage was written, to praise the CCP's leadership in the war and glorify the braveness of the Eighth Route Army (a group army under the command of the CCP during the Second Sino-Japanese War) in fighting foreign invaders and protecting the nation and people.

The rise of the topic of CCP's prominent contribution to Chinese nation during the Second Sino-Japanese War may be attributed to the advent of the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in mid-October 2007. This Congress marked a smooth transition to the fifth generation of party leadership, with the CPC General Secretary, Hu Jintao, solidifying his position of leader. The CCP's twice-a-decade National Congress was

undoubtedly a significant political event. In China, there is a political tradition of guiding or unifying public opinion before and during any political event to ensure it is a successful process (Shirk, 2011; Stockmann, 2013; Zhao, 1998). The Second Sino-Japanese War was considered as the darkest page in China's history through which Chinese people fought against invaders with the huge cost of twenty million deaths, therefore, representing this history greatly helps the government to stimulate national cohesion. Meanwhile, this war was the first complete victory against foreign invasion in Chinese modern history, which has an irreplaceable function in inspiring national pride, stressing the leadership and legitimacy of the China Communist Party, as well as in encouraging people to embrace the politically important event (Coble, 2015). However, as Sino-Japanese relations had largely improved in 2006, the *People's Daily* started to actively promote bilateral cooperation in its reporting of Japan and became cautious of mentioning war-related content. Therefore, journalists and editors adopted the tactic of retelling stories of the war by emphasizing the CCP's role in national independence while playing down the Japanese military's aggressive activities.

Initiating the national remembrance of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 2014

Since 2014 the *People's Daily* has started to initiate a discursive power on historical topics and opened a national remembrance of the second Sino-Japanese War. This move could be viewed as the official media's resonance to the new leadership, Xi Jinping's China Dream initiative (Callahan, 2015; Ferdinand, 2016; Zhang, 2016).

Despite war history and war-related controversies were conventional and persistent themes in the *People's Daily's* reporting of Japan, there was an abrupt change in the themes of the articles on war history, and became very proactive and emotive tone from 2014 to 2015. Between 2001 and 2013, the *People's Daily* did not focus its attention on memorializing the Second Sino-Japanese War. Even on some remarkable dates such as the 15th August and 18th September, there were only a very few of articles that briefly mentioned the war without detailed stories. In 2014 there was a significant change on this issue. The *People's Daily* started to actively and intensively emphasize the Sino-Japanese War, mainly focusing on three memorable dates: 7th July, 1937, 3rd September, 1945 and 12th December, 1937. The 7th of July, 1937 is the anniversary of the Marco Polo Bridge incident, which officially marked the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War. On 3rd September, 1945, Japan surrendered in World War II, making this day the Victory over Japan Day in many Asian countries. The 12th of December, 1937 refers to the most bitter memory for the Chinese people because the

Nanjing massacre took place on this date, which killed 300,000 Chinese civilians according to China's evaluation. Since the above-mentioned three dates marked momentous times in the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Chinese government and public usually hold many memorial events across the country. During 2014-2015, the *People's Daily* intensively reported such memorial events, portraying the atrocities of Japanese militarism, condemning the Japanese government's ambiguous attitude towards the war history, honouring the national heroes who fought against the Japanese aggressors, celebrating the great victory over Japan with an emphasis on the CCP's leadership, as well as linking the war to China's current economic development and achievement (the *People's Daily*, 07/07/2014, 15/08/2014, 12/12/2014).

It is likely that the proactive and emotive change of war history content by the *People's Daily* was partly a response to President Xi Jinping's China Dream initiative. The China Dream became a major issue in November, 2012 when Xi Jinping declared that his China Dream was for the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation', which, as he later explained, meant achieving a rich and powerful country, the revitalization of the nation, and the people's happiness. Since being put forward, Xi's China Dream has attracted mass attention from political, academic and media spectrums, domestically and internationally. A number of studies have discussed the China Dream as a positive expression of the PRC's goal in domestic and foreign policy to make the Chinese nation wealthy and strong and provide the Chinese people with the social and economic benefits of a 'moderately prosperous society' (Ferdinand, 2016; Tsang, 2016). However, other scholars, such as Callahan (2017) viewed the China Dream discourse as more of a negative than positive soft power, which contained strong anti-Japanese or anti-Western implications aimed at safeguarding the regime's legitimacy at home.

It has been argued that the China Dream is closely linked to the bitterness and suffering of China's modern history (Wang, 2014). Zhang (2016) has suggested that the China Dream was interpreted by the Chinese authorities as a dream of reviving the Chinese nation, which suffered dreadful humiliation by a few foreign powers, including invasion, for more than 100 years. Callahan (2015) argued that 'to understand the positive soft power of China's dreams, you need to understand the negative soft power of its nightmares'. The Second Sino-Japanese War was the darkest page in the modern history of China during which Chinese people fought against invaders with a huge cost of 20 million deaths; therefore, representing this history has greatly helped the government to stimulate national cohesion. Meanwhile, it was also the first

complete victory over a foreign invasion in modern Chinese history, which has had an irreplaceable function of inspiring national pride and stressing the leadership and legitimacy of the CCP. Therefore, the history of the Second Sino-Japanese War has been a crucial part of the China Dream discourse, which had been raised to a significant level by the *People's Daily* since 2014.

The discourse of geopolitical fears which covering Sino-Japanese conflicts, was associated with the theme of 'emphasizing the CCP's contribution to the Chinese nation and strengthening its legitimacy' and represented the *People's Daily's* active and positive strategy in guiding public opinion and promoting the party-state's ideology. Furthermore, the 2007' and 2014's cases illustrated that the 'anti-Japanese' narrative was not the aim, but rather the by-product, of media discourse.

4.4.2 Delimitating the boundary of 'Maintaining Social Stability'

Despite setting the key theme of 'emphasizing the CCP's contribution to the Chinese nation and strengthening its legitimacy' by employing discourse of geopolitical fears which reporting Sino-Japanese conflicts, simultaneously, China's official media tried to manage and limit the hostility, antagonism, and even social instability brought by those discursive strategies. To this end, the *People's Daily* used the geoeconomic hope discourse which covering the bilateral cooperation and region peace to de-radicalize Chinese people's antagonistic sentiments towards Japan, stabilize Sino-Japanese relations, and ultimately, delimitate the boundary of 'maintaining social stability' for China's political communication sphere. The following two cases provide explicit, empirical explanation for the *People's Daily's* adoption of geoeconomic hope discourse to appease anti-Japanese sentiment, dismiss mass demonstrations and maintain social stability.

In 2005, the then prime minister Koizumi's annual visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, the Japanese government's approval of the *New History Textbook* and the proposal that Japan be granted a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) jointly formed the backdrop for the 2005 anti-Japanese demonstrations in China. Masses of people protested against the Japanese government's denial of its past war crimes and its bid for permanent membership on the UNSC. These protests were peaceful at the start, but turned violent (Kawashima, 2015; Reilly, 2013). Across China businesses with connections to Japan were vandalized, and several Japanese nationals residing in China were injured. This spontaneously radical event,

in the name of ‘patriotism’, was not sponsored by the Chinese government (Lye & Wu, 2013; Tang & Darr, 2012). The Chinese government had realized the potential risks of anti-Japanese protests, including further deteriorating bilateral relations, reducing the chances of reaching a diplomatic compromise with Japan, and resulting in social and political instability. Therefore, the Chinese authorities quickly quietened down the agitated stories from the official media (Reilly, 2013). Although the 2005 anti-Japanese demonstrations was a media-chasing topic, the *People’s Daily* did not report them in order to avoid conveying the message that the Chinese government acquiesced or supported the protests (Stockmann, 2010). Furthermore, it abruptly switched the conversation to the subject of China-Japan stability and friendship, as well as their economic complementarity. A number of articles reported ‘Sino-Japanese friendship is the overall situation’ (*PD*, 25/04/2005), ‘Sino-Japanese economy cooperation and trade: the achievements are hard won, we still need to ride the wave’ (*PD*, 26/04/2005), ‘Japan worked out the draft plan of a low carbon society campaign’ (*PD*, 28/04/2005), and ‘building a bright future of Sino-Japanese cultural exchange’ (*PD*, 04/05/2005). These efforts of calming matters did not work, however, it is likely that this anti-Japanese demonstration made the Chinese leadership realize that its narratives of the Second Sino-Japanese War had brought some unexpected consequences.

The second case is the intensive media coverage of Japanese Shokichi Umeya¹ to China’s Revolution of 1911, after the Sino-Japanese boat collision in 2010. Conventionally, China’s narrative of Sino-Japanese friendship focused on two periods of China’s Sui and Tang dynasties (around 600 AD) and the 1970-80s. From the late 19th century, Sino-Japanese relations deteriorated due to Japan’s military expansion and two Sino-Japanese wars. The benign contacts between the two nations in modern times (1840-1949) were rarely described in the Chinese media. However, in 2011 the *People’s Daily* opened a new topic of Sino-Japanese friendship and discovered the Revolution of 1911 as a landmark of bilateral friendship between China and Japan in modern times and intensively reported it. The Revolution of 1911 overthrew China’s last imperial dynasty (the Qing dynasty), and established the Republic of China (ROC). It has been commemorated in both mainland China (PRC) and Taiwan (ROC) for its significance of the beginning of nationalism, republicanism, the modernization of China, and national unity. Chinese people viewed Sun Yat-sen as the leader of the revolution despite Yuan Shikai, a Chinese general, forcing the last Qing

¹ Shokichi Umeya (1868-1934) was a Japanese film producer who financially supported Sun Yat-sen’s revolutionary activities over a period and nearly 20 years.

Emperor to abdicate. Since it was a Chinese domestic revolution, other countries' roles had been rarely mentioned, including Japan. However, news stories in 2011's *People's Daily* portrayed Japan as providing important assistance in China's 1911 revolution. A number of articles reported China and Japan jointly memorialized the 100 years' anniversary of the 1911 revolution (*PD*, 30/09/2011; 04/12/2011; 01/10/2011). One Japanese name repeatedly appeared in these articles, Shokichi Umeya. Shokichi Umeya was a Japanese film promoter and producer who financially supported Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary activities over a period of nearly 20 years (*PD*, 01/10/2011). These articles praised Shokichi's financial help to Sun, and highlighted that the profound friendship between Shokichi and Sun had a great symbolic meaning for current Sino-Japanese relations.

China's official media praise of a foreigner's help in the Chinese revolution was unconventional, especially help from the Japanese, as Japan started military expansion and the bilateral relations became hostile since the first Sino-Japanese War (1895-1898). Introducing Shokichi Umeya's generous help to Sun and adopting the Revolution of 1911 as a memorable event of Sino-Japanese exchanges and friendship had conveyed an explicit meaning of geoeconomic hope, which aiming at improving the fragile bilateral relations and de-radicalizing the anti-Japanese sentiments prevailing among Chinese people, under the circumstance that the territorial dispute in East China Sea kept simmering in 2011.

Conclusion

As this thesis aims at investigating media-politics dynamics in contemporary China through the research lens of the 'actor, connector and interlocutor', this chapter examined the monopolistic actor in China's 'vigorous but censored' communication space—the Chinese official media's narrations of Sino-Japanese relations. The results of content analysis showed that the framing strategies of international affairs of Sino-Japanese relations in the *People's Daily* was produced and rearticulated by the combinations of, and change in, the discourses of geopolitical fears and geoeconomic hopes. To be specific, the Chinese official media's discourses of geopolitical fear mainly focused on the historical controversies and temporarily territorial disagreements between China and Japan, Japan's active engagement in regional and international issues, and the instability and militarization in Japan's domestic politics. On the contrary, its narratives of geoeconomic hope highlighted the cooperative accomplishment and potential between the Chinese and Japanese governments and sincere friendship between the two peoples, as well as the advanced aspects of Japan's domestic

affairs. These results provided a counter-argument to the prevailing view that assumes that the political framing strategies of China in relation to Japan are dominated by the discourse of conflict, threat and fear. The results echoed Chan's (2014) viewpoints that, China's official discursive strategies aimed at delegitimizing Japanese claims on Sino-Japanese conflicts, but also emphasizing importance of a shared 'Asian' identity and mutual interests. Therefore, this thesis suggests that China's official discourse on the issue of Sino-Japanese relations is shown to be considerably comprehensive and informative rather than a pure 'propaganda instrument', which is automatically labelled by many studies.

The chapter argued that through the alignment and balance of the discourses of geopolitical fears and geoeconomic hopes, the monopolistic actor of Chinese official media set the key theme of 'emphasizing the CCP's contribution and legitimacy' for other media participants' discussions, as well as delimited the boundary of 'maintaining social stability' to China's political communication space on the issue of Sino-Japanese relations. This chapter contended that the theme and boundary the *People's Daily* set, aimed to increase public support of the regimes leadership and legitimacy, stabilize Sino-Japanese relations, and de-radicalize the antagonistic sentiments towards Japan, showing a high parallelism with the Chinese government's policies, stances and interests on the issue of Sino-Japanese relations. Although the concept of political parallelism has been mostly applied in (both established and emerging) democracies, and was closely associated with partisanship (e.g. Mancini, 2012; Seymour-Ure, 1974), the findings of this chapter demonstrated its manifestation in the one-party, authoritarian context of China. China's official media, as the monopolistic actor in the Chinese political communication space, has shown to be highly paralleled with its state on foreign affairs. Through producing and combining discourses of geopolitical fears and geoeconomic hopes, it created a comprehensive media image of Japan rather than a one-side 'invader'. However, how have the public, news agencies, or other media participants responded to this multifaceted, love-and-hate representation of Japan? The following chapters explore the digital debates on Japan and Sino-Japanese relations from the connector (the public) and interlocutor (the media elite) dimensions.

5 Reflexive Deliberation in the ‘Connector’ Dimension of China’s Political Communication Spaces: the Heterogeneous Public

To investigate the media-politics dynamics in contemporary China, the previous chapters of this thesis have contextualized Volkmer’s (2014) research model of ‘actor, connector and interlocutor’ with proposing three types of digital-networked political communication spaces as well as classifying China’s political communication sphere as the (type 2) ‘vigorous but censored space’ in which various media participants take the roles of actor, connector and interlocutor in the process of political information flow but their power and influence are far from symmetrical. Chapter 4 examined the monopolistic actor’s narrations of Sino-Japanese relations through content analysing news coverage of Japan from China’s most important Party organ of the *People’s Daily*. The results demonstrated combined discourses of geopolitical fears and geoeconomic hopes, through which it created a comprehensive media image of Japan rather than a one-side ‘invader’.

This chapter, then, focuses on the ‘connector dimension’ of China’s political communication space—public discussion and deliberation, through qualitatively analysing the digital debate on Sino-Japanese relations from Sina Weibo, China’s most popular social networking site. This chapter is organized as follows. The first section introduces the concept of ‘reflexive deliberation’ in the Chinese context (Section 5.1). Next, through qualitatively analysing the online posts of Sino-Japanese relations from Sina Weibo between 2010 and 2016, the findings of this chapter show a remarkable heterogeneity of participants’ perceptions and expressions in the digital debates on Sino-Japanese relations (Section 5.2).

While most current studies on Chinese civic discussion and deliberation have adopted a Western lens that has focused on the ‘democratizing’ or ‘emancipatory’ potential of digital, media-enhanced public deliberation in contemporary China, this chapter engages in this debate by proposing an alternative concept of deliberation. It defines ‘reflexive deliberation’ in the Chinese context as a ‘self-conflictive’ deliberation resulting from endogenically diversified and contested viewpoints, and leading to the self-division of China’s political communication space. Through content analysis of the digital debate on Sino-Japanese relations, the results show a remarkable heterogeneity of participants’ perceptions and expressions in China’s online sphere on this issue. The communication practices of Chinese netizens were classified into four distinctively reflexive dimensions of mass deliberation,

involving ‘emotional, malcontent expressions’, ‘rational, constructive perceptions’, ‘positive energy transmissions’, and ‘self-interested viewpoints’. While conventionally, the notion of deliberation views a healthy, inclusive and robust democracy as its ultimate goal, the evidence from this chapter point in a different direction. It suggests that—at least on the issue of Sino-Japanese relations—China’s reflexive deliberation may lead to some heterogeneous—even paradoxical—outcomes in the political communication space, rather than a single, emancipatory and democratizing trend.

5.1 The Concept of ‘Reflexive Deliberation’ in the Chinese Context

The idea of deliberation emphasizes the vital role of civic discussion in a healthy, robust democracy through inclusive, informed and negotiated political opinion-formation and decision-making (Bohman, 1997; Dahlgren, 2005; Elster, 1998). Since originally rooted in the Habermasian reflection on the historical development of the bourgeois public sphere, from the very start, the notion of deliberation has been closely related to democracy. By integrating the political science and communication perspectives, the specific conception of deliberative democracy has been variously defined as ‘a process of reaching reasoned agreement among free and equal citizens’ (Bohman, 1997, p. 321), as ‘the procedures of open discussion aimed at achieving rationally motivated consensus’ (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 156), and as ‘communication that induces reflection on preferences and perspectives in non-coercive fashion’ (Dryzek, 2000, p. 6).

With the dramatic development of ICTs, advocates of deliberative democracy have focused their research attention on the Internet and social media platforms, envisioning ‘cyberspace’ as a new, democratic public sphere in which peer-to-peer exchanges and many-to-many forums enable large numbers of citizens to deliberate on a broad range of public issues and express their informed, thoughtful views in ways that reflect and influence public opinion as well as urge cooperation by political decision-makers (Coleman, 2004). A growing theoretical and empirical literature has addressed the mechanisms of digital communication in diversifying political information, cultivating people’s tolerance for opposite viewpoints, and facilitating pluralist opinions, which have all contributed to the formation of effective, rational, civic debate and democracy (e.g., Albrecht, 2006; Baek et al., 2012; Dahlgren, 2005; Medaglia & Yang, 2017; Wright & Street, 2007). Additionally, a few conceptual initiatives have been developed to illuminate the reconfigurations of mass deliberation that have taken place in new digital spheres, involving the notions of ‘digital deliberation’ (Siedschlag, 2007),

‘deliberative transparency’, which is often associated with *Wikileaks* (Slaughter, 2014), and ‘deliberative public interdependence’ (Volkmer, 2014).

Considering the democratic function of mass deliberation, many studies applied the framework of public deliberation to China, the largest non-democratic nation (e.g., He, 2014; Medaglia & Yang, 2017; Stockmann & Luo, 2015). Although some features of deliberation are viewed as having deep roots within traditional Chinese culture, such as the Confucian practices of consultation and common discussion (He & Warren, 2011), studies suggested that large-scale deliberation had not taken place in China until the advent of the digital epoch (Jiang, 2010; Le et al., 2016). As China’s mass media system has been seen as being exclusively controlled by the state, exercising a ‘mouthpiece’ role of the government and propagating filtered, pro-government information, the emergent online space, because of its inclusive and participatory natures, has been expected to create a virtual deliberative sphere where diverse information is disseminated and political topics are discussed (Medaglia & Yang, 2017; Stockmann & Luo, 2015). Within the debate on China’s digital deliberation, new approaches have been developed to map the unique characteristics of the Chinese context in this issue. For instance, Le et al. (2016) proposed the concept of ‘incomplete deliberation’ which suggests that China’s deliberation is not fully achieved and functions to soften attitudes rather than polarize viewpoints. Xiang and Li (2014) put forth the term of ‘event-specific deliberation’ to suggest that China’s public deliberation is usually restricted within certain fields and topics, such as environmental protection. A more widely accepted notion is ‘authoritarian deliberation’ (Jiang, 2010; He, 2014) that refers to ‘deliberative practices appearing within authoritarian regimes led by a party with no apparent interest in regime-level democratization’ (He & Warren, 2011, p. 269).

However, the notion of deliberation that is originated from the Western scholarship and its relationship to democracy have been implicitly or explicitly imposed on research involving deliberation in China, concluding that the process of China’s deliberation has been ‘incomplete’ or ‘authoritarian’ (e.g., Jiang, 2010; He, 2014). This Western model overlooks the significant influences of the Chinese political culture on its deliberative sphere, such as respecting authority and emphasizing collectivity (Jiang et al., 2016), and the Chinese media traditions of strict censorship and self-censorship (Stockmann & Luo, 2015). These neglected elements have jointly configured the internal motivations, structures, and dynamics of China’s public deliberation, which have significantly differed from established democracies in Europe

and North America. Since the Western viewpoints have omitted important aspects of Chinese culture, this chapter puts forth an alternative form of deliberation with a focus on the local socio-political context in China and conducts a case study to examine its utility.

This chapter proposes the term of ‘reflexive deliberation’ to describe the characteristics and configuration of mass deliberation in China’s political communication sphere. It suggests, despite sharing general norms of ‘pluralist opinions’ and ‘active civic engagement’ with the Western concept of deliberation, mass deliberation in China has shown a different landscape. The conventional values of deliberation, which refer to openness, rationality and critical check on the state (Asen & Brower, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005), have been significantly challenged and complemented by other elements in Chinese deliberative space.

Deliberation in China has been largely restricted within domestic boundaries because China’s communication sphere has operated under the world’s most complicated and successful censorship mechanism (Jiang, 2010; Tai, 2014). An open, deliberative media environment in which unblocked or unfiltered information and viewpoints from the outside world, especially from the West, can freely disseminate and resonate has been and continue to be far from reality in China. In addition, in China’s cyberspace, emotional attitudes (anger in particular) and expressions toward public affairs have usually collided with level-headed and pragmatic thoughts (Wallis, 2011), challenging the traditionally ‘rational biases’ in deliberation research. Furthermore, the long-lasting, effective, political propaganda, China’s dramatic economic achievements over the past forty years, and its traditional political culture of respecting authority and collectivism, have jointly contributed to the formation of a genuine, pro-government group among the Chinese public. Affirmative attitudes toward the state have voluntarily filtered and refuted the challenging voices in China’s cyberspace (Guo, 2017), shrinking the conventional role of a ‘critical check on the government’ by mass deliberation. Moreover, by entering the communicative sphere and challenging the deliberative norms of rationality and critique, both the emotional expressions and affirmative viewpoints have become competitive and supplementary forces in China’s deliberation ecology, making China’s cyberspace a fairly diverse, contested and conflictive field.

The aforementioned, distinguishing characteristics differentiate the public debate in China from the Western notion of deliberative democracy, and calls for an alternative explanation and interpretation rather than simply labelling China’s deliberation as ‘incomplete’ or

‘authoritarian’. This chapter uses the term ‘reflexive deliberation’ to explicate deliberation in the Chinese context.

D’Cruz et al. defined reflexivity as ‘an individual’s considered response to an immediate context and making choices for further direction’ (D’Cruz et al., 2007, p.75). Social science debates have addressed the notion of reflexivity in many fields, such as ‘reflexive sociology’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), ‘reflexive ethnography’ (Davies, 2008), and ‘reflexive modernity’ (Beck et al., 1994) in globalization research. While some authors view concepts of ‘reflexivity’ and ‘(critical) reflection’ interchangeably, this article draws upon Beck et al.’s (1994) approach, which distinguishes the two words by emphasizing the reflexive process is identified by ‘self-confrontation’:

Let us call the autonomous, undesired and unseen, transition from industrial to risk society reflexivity (to differentiate it from and contrast it with reflection). Then ‘reflexive modernization’ means self-confrontation with the effects of risk society that cannot be dealt with and assimilated in the system of industrial society. (Beck et al., 1994, p. 6)

Although several studies have implied that contemporary communication shows a feature of reflexivity, for instance Castells (2009) considered networked power as a ‘reflexive’ form, ‘the form of power exercised by certain nodes over other nodes within the network’ (Castells, 2009, p. 419), few works have explicitly investigated the communication space from a reflexive perspective. An exception is Volkmer (2014) who argued that the notion of reflexive deliberation ‘serves as a broad conceptual matrix for the understanding of public interdependence as a local, subjective perception of a reflexive resonance space’ (Volkmer, 2014, p. 101). She also suggested that the increasingly dense transnational communication accelerates and intensifies the discourse of ‘self-confrontation’.

Despite its Western origin, the notion of reflexivity provides an appropriate conceptual grid to examine Chinese deliberation because its essence of ‘self-confrontation’ precisely characterizes the conflictive nature of China’s political communication space in which contests and disagreements have been endogenous more than exogenous. Therefore, the notion of ‘reflexive deliberation’ in the Chinese context as a ‘self-conflictive’ deliberation resulting from endogenically diverse and contested viewpoints, and leading to the

self-division of China's political communication space.

The conflictive nature of China's deliberation has largely derived from the diversification of and contests among discourses and attitudes in China's political communication space. However, these conflicts are over-simplified to be the antagonism between the authoritarian Chinese government and its deliberative people, which overlooks the disagreements and confrontations that have taken place *within* the deliberative public. In the mass media era, deliberation was, to a large extent, repressed in China because the public strictly followed the official narratives. Digitally networked communications have exposed the Chinese public to an unprecedentedly abundant amount of information and alternative viewpoints that have complemented, re-enforced and challenged the normative discourses, and therefore, have promoted public deliberation (Denemark & Chunn, 2016; Medaglia & Yang, 2017). However, in researching China's digital deliberation, a 'repression and resistance model' (or 'cat and mouse game' model) has been widely adopted and generalized as the overwhelming feature of Chinese cyberspace. A group of studies investigated the antagonistic relations between the Chinese government's pervasive surveillance and censorship in the digital sphere on the one hand, and resistance by a deliberative and digitally skilful public, on the other (Luo, 2014; Zhang & Lin, 2014; Zhou & Moy, 2007). The premise of these articles has seemed to view the dissenting 'public' as the overwhelming outcome of China's mass deliberation, who are dissatisfied with the Chinese state and actively challenge it through direct condemnation or indirect political satire, spoofing, and ironic use of politically correct language. However, these approaches of simply considering the deliberative Chinese public as a dissenting force and opposing the Chinese state and its people coagulate fluid social relations and deny differentiation and conflict among the 'public'.

To better capture the conflictive nature of China's digital deliberation, we first need to recognize its multiplicity. Here the concept of 'counterpublic' is relevant, which helps to illuminate the Chinese cyberspace as a diverse, contested ground. The counterpublic theory criticizes the perception of a singular, overarching bourgeois public sphere and pushes the literature in the direction of multiplicity, by recognizing social complexity and sociocultural diversity (Asen & Brower, 2001; Felski, 1989; Fraser, 1992). As a prominent proponent of counterpublic theory, Felski (1989) proposed that counterpublic sphere consisted of multiple and heterogeneous social forces that do not converge to form a homogenized, revolutionary outcome, but advance differences and specificities related to, such as gender, race, sexuality,

and ethnicity. Felski's (1989) perception of 'appeals to differences' of the counterpublic sphere provides a starting point to understand the heterogeneity viewpoints of China's cyberspace. Media digitalization and globalization, in parallel with the unique Chinese sociopolitical culture, have brought multiple and paradoxical consequences to China's deliberation. These paradoxical consequences have been embodied in several confrontations in China's political communication space, including the confrontation between information diversification and viewpoint polarization, between long-standing affirmative attitudes towards the government and emerging, challenging voices (Guo, 2017), between radical nationalism and moderate pragmatism (Yang & Zheng, 2012), and between civic culture and apolitical individualization and consumerism (Day, 2011). The deliberation-incited disagreements and conflicts within and across groups facilitate further deliberation by stirring up fierce civic debate, creating a robustly deliberative loop in China's political communication space.

However, it has always been overlooked that these confrontations, which have resulted from and lead to China's deliberation, are endogenous more than exogenous, and therefore, as 'self-conflictive' and 'reflexive'. Deliberation and political communication in most Western nations are open to transnational, regional and global spaces (Coleman, 2004), as the democratized systems usually guarantee the unfiltered and unblocked information flow across national boundaries. The geographical, political, cultural and linguistic proximities help to connect the national, deliberative sphere in Western societies with each other, integrating them into wider spheres, such as the 'European sphere' or the 'Western sphere' (Volkmer, 2014). Debates of domestic politics conveying local and national perspectives are easy to enter regional and global agendas and gain a wider resonance, which promote further domestic deliberation. Therefore, mass deliberation in these nations can be considered 'endogenous' as well as 'exogenous'.

In contrast, China's political communication space is open to domestic discussion but closed to the outside, especially the Western world. Being scored as very high as 87 (0 = most free to 100 = least free) by Freedom House (2017), China's cyberspace was considered as one of the least free globally. Employing the world's most complicated and successful censorship mechanism, the Chinese government has blocked most world-wide social media websites in mainland China, including Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube, as well as temporarily or permanently shutting down any websites or user accounts on social media that have been

perceived to disseminate ‘unhealthy’ content (Stockmann & Luo, 2015; Tai, 2014). This is not to suggest that the Chinese public has been immune to globalized information flows because China’s media landscape has been dramatically re-configured by capital globalization and digital technology. However, when topics are related to significant domestic politics and foreign relations, alternative viewpoints from abroad have had difficulty entering the centre of Chinese public discussion. While state censorship and blockage is one crucial reason, language barriers have also restricted the views from Western countries to a debate among English-savvy ‘elites’, rather than a process of mass deliberation. Therefore, Chinese public engagement of political discussion has unfolded and has been restricted within an allowed, domestic space, where previously unified discourse has self-divided into contests due to the diversification of inward viewpoints rather than challenged or persuaded by external narratives. Deliberation in the Chinese context from this perspective is ‘endogenous’ rather than ‘exogenous’.

5.2 The Heterogeneous Connectors in China’s Digital Spheres on the Issue of Japan

This thesis contextualizes Volkmer’s (2014) research model of the ‘actor, connector and interlocutor’ to explore the political communication arrangement in contemporary Chinese context, defining the China’s official narratives as the ‘actor’ dimension, China’s public discussion on political issues as the ‘connector’ dimension, and the media, political and social elites’ interpretation and re-mediation process as the ‘interlocutor’ dimension. This thesis also suggests that information technologies and digital communication applications have provided platforms for the ‘connector’ dimension and enabled previously passive audiences to subjectively and reflectively communicate with others, and therefore, become connectors. The results of content analysis revealed a remarkable heterogeneity of the connector’s perceptions in the digital debates on Sino-Japanese relations. The communication practices of Chinese netizens were classified into four distinctively reflexive dimensions of mass deliberation, involving ‘emotional, malcontent expressions’, ‘rational, constructive perceptions’, ‘positive energy transmission’, and ‘self-interested viewpoints’. However, before introducing the specific characteristic of each type, results of main variables of content analysis are shown in Table 5.1 and summarised as follows.

Results of content analysis showed that in terms of the *source* of online posts regarding Sino-Japanese relations, original posts was the largest group (47.77%, $n=6,854$), followed by reposts with original comments (29.26%, $n=4,288$), and reposts without original comments

(23.97%, $n=3,513$). It means that the majority of Weibo posts contained original content (information, opinion and sentiment) rather than simply shared, re-disseminated news. This finding illustrates that in the digital debate of Sino-Japanese relations, a robust public deliberation has emerged in China's online sphere with that mass people have actively, subjectively engaged in civic discussion, providing their own viewpoints on foreign relations issues. However, the results also demonstrated that from the perspective of the *influence* in the online world, ordinary Chinese netizen's voices (non-verified users from Sina Weibo) were very easy to sink in the information sea, since the average number of repost of non-verified users was .61 ($SD=2.99$), and the average number of comments was .55 ($SD=1.23$). Furthermore, it found that just a small section of total sample included external hyperlinks (16.48%, $n=2,415$), while more than 80 percent Weibo posts did not link to other external sources or platforms.

In terms of the specific theme (or topic) each Weibo post mentioned, results of analysis showed that the theme of 'Contemporary Japanese culture and society' occupied the first place (22.53%, $n=3,302$), followed by topics of 'Sino-Japanese War history and war-related issues' (21.87%, $n=3,205$), and 'Sino-Japanese contemporary territorial dispute and other geopolitical conflicts' (15.57%, $n=2,282$). The fourth oft-mentioned theme was 'Japan's international engagement and its bilateral relations with countries other than China' (13.62%, $n=1,996$), closely followed by the topic of 'The Chinese state's policy towards Japan' (11.61%, $n=1,702$). Two small parts of the total sample discussed the issues of Sino-Japanese governmental cooperation (4.94%, $n=724$) and Sino-Japanese people-to-people exchanges (4.45%, $n=652$), which illustrated that while the conflictive themes and content set by the actor (China's official media) have gained general acceptance by the connector dimension, the cooperative themes faced rejection in China's online space. Another unimportant theme was about 'Japan's domestic political and economic issues', which occupied only 5.57% of the total sample ($n=817$). In addition to the above-mention eight themes (topics), a small section of Sina Weibo's posts on this issue conveyed very radical indignant towards Japan but did not including any actual meaning or consent, and I classified such posts as 'Subjectless, radical and indignant sentiments' (8.70%, $n=1,275$). Because those themes were not mutually exclusive and some online posts contained more than one themes, this thesis counted the number of themes each Weibo post including. The statistics showed that the average number of themes individual post mentioned was 1.10 ($SD=.36$), illustrating that the majority of Weibo posts regarding Japan and Sino-Japanese relations focused on one specific theme or

topic rather than discussed several aspects of this issue within one post.

Table 5.1 Content analysis results of Sina Weibo's non-verified users' online posts on the issue of Japan and Sino-Japanese relations between 2009 and 2016 (N=14,655)

<p>Source:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Original posts: 47.77%, $n=6,854$ 2. Reposts with original comments: 29.26%, $n=4,288$ 3. Reposts without original comments: 23.97%, $n=3,513$
<p>The number of repost: $M=$ 61, $SD=2.99$</p> <p>The number of comment: $M=$ 55, $SD=1.23$</p>
<p>Supplementary data:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Including external hyperlink: 16.48%, $n=2,415$ 2. Not including external hyperlink: 83.52%, $n=12, 240$
<p>Theme:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sino-Japanese War history and war-related issues: 21.87%, $n=3,205$ 2. Sino-Japanese territorial dispute and other geopolitical conflicts: 15.57%, $n=2,282$ 3. Japan's domestic political and economic issues: 5.57%, $n=817$ 4. Japan's international engagements: 13.62%, $n=1,996$ 5. Sino-Japanese governmental cooperation: 4.94%, $n=724$ 6. Sino-Japanese people-to-people exchanges: 4.45%, $n=652$ 7. Contemporary Japanese culture and society: 22.53%, $n=3,302$ 8. The Chinese state's policy towards Japan: 11.61%, $n=1,702$ 9. Subjectless, radical and indignant sentiments: 8.70%, $n=1,275$ <p>Number of themes each Weibo post contained: $M=1.10$, $SD=.36$</p>
<p>The point of view:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Emotional, malcontent expressions: 22.48%, $n = 3,924$ 2. Rational, constructive perceptions: 33.53%, $n = 4,913$ 3. Positive energy transmissions: 17.78%, $n = 2,605$ 4. Self-interested viewpoints: 38.19%, $n = 5,597$

During the content analysis process, four types of 'point of view' have emerged, representing the reflexive dimensions of mass deliberation, involving 'emotional, malcontent expressions', 'rational, constructive perceptions', 'positive energy transmission', and 'self-interested viewpoints'. This thesis categorized Weibo posts that vented a strong but irresponsible, angry sentiment (including anger toward Japan, toward China's policy on Japan, and toward Chinese people who held favourable feelings about Japan) as 'emotional, malcontent expressions'. The results of the content analysis showed that the emotional, malcontent expressions occupied just under a quarter of the total sample (22.48%, $n = 3,924$). It classified Weibo posts that conveyed rational, pragmatic and constructive thoughts on Sino-Japanese relations, as well as on wider themes of China's domestic and foreign affairs, as 'rational, constructive perceptions'. The findings illustrated that this group made up about one third of the microblogs (33.53%, $n = 4,913$). Posts that expressed affirmative and laudatory evaluations of the Chinese government, about its policy towards Japan and the state's general

governing capability were defined as ‘positive energy transmissions’ which occupied 17.78% ($n = 2,605$) of the total sample. Posts on Sino-Japanese relations that conveyed a disinterest in politics and China’s foreign relations but were concerned about the negative impact of deteriorating bilateral relations on their personal lives were labelled by this study as ‘self-interested viewpoints’, which were the largest group of online opinions on Sino-Japanese relations, accounting for 38.19% ($n = 5,597$) of the sample. Because these four types of communication practices and attitudes were not mutually exclusive, their summation was over 100%. The following analysis of each type begins with an investigation of the emotional, malcontent expressions which have been viewed by previous studies as the most dominant force in China’s cyberspace.

5.2.1 The Emotional, Malcontent Expressions: Deliberating Chinese Public with Anger

One distinctive dimension of reflexive deliberation in China’s digital sphere was the ‘emotional, malcontent expressions’ which occupied around one fourth of the total sample (22.48%, $n = 3,924$). This finding refuted two widely accepted standpoints: one view has suggested that China’s online space has been dominated by ‘angry youths’ (*fengqing*), and the other view has marginalized the expression of affect and sentiment in Chinese deliberation research.

Previous studies have suggested that China’s digital communication space has been occupied by ‘angry youths’, that is, leftist youths who have displayed a high level of exclusive nationalism or patriotism in foreign relations, and are strongly dissatisfied with Chinese society and the government in domestic affairs (Rosen, 2009; Yang & Zheng, 2012). It is argued that these angry youths have usually disseminated their indignation through digital media platforms, have called for an aggressive political stance towards Japan and the United States, and have ‘hijacked’ the Chinese government and forced it to show a hard line in foreign affairs (Wallis, 2011). However, the content analysis of Sina Weibo posts revealed that radical emotion and indignant sentiments were not a dominant part in China’s digital space, occupying less than a quarter of the total sample. This relatively small representation suggested that their voice might have been eclipsed by more level-headed commentaries.

The analysis of the emotional-driven malcontent also illustrated the significant, motivated role of angry sentiment in Chinese public deliberations, which refuted the norm that excludes affect and sentiment from the deliberation process. This study used the term, ‘emotional,

malcontent expressions’, to replace the term, ‘angry youth’, so as to include all age cohorts. It defined ‘emotional, malcontent expressions’ as online opinions which showed political enthusiasm by expressing concern with political issues across a variety of China’s domestic or foreign affairs, but those opinions and expressions were driven by strongly and personally indignant sentiment, rather than rational discussion. Therefore, the online activities of emotional, malcontent expressions were more like a vent of their dissenting sentiments that lacked persuasive or compelling evidence for other net users. Nonetheless, emotional, malcontent expressions have played an irreplaceable role in promoting fierce discussion and motivating further deliberation, as their conflictive, radical and aggressive speeches easily incurred critiques and refutation from others.

Analysis of the Sina Weibo posts revealed that the malcontent opinions expressed extremely negative and derogatory rhetoric to show their strongly anti-Japanese sentiments. Some wording was related to the history legacies of the Sino-Japanese war that is still used today, such as ‘little Japs’ (*xiao riben*), ‘Japanese pirates’ (*wokou*), or ‘Japanese devils’ (*riben guizi*). Their abusive comments on Japan frequently showed up on Sina Weibo, even during the period when Sino-Japanese relations significantly improved in 2011. Some posts written on Sina Weibo were as follows:

‘The Japanese devils do not deserve to be treated as ‘human’. I hope this country disappears in the world.’ (Sina Weibo, 2012)

‘Shinzo Abe [Japanese prime minister] is the United States’ puppy who does not have an independent personality but barks according to its master’s orders.’ (Sina Weibo, 2014)

‘Little Japs criticized us for repeating the Japanese’s invasion history of China. We could stop mentioning its invasive past as long as Japan sends 10,000 Japanese girls to China to be the ‘comfort women’ for the Chinese army.’ (Sina Weibo, 2016)

In addition to posting vituperative comments toward Japan, the emotional, malcontent expressions usually associated Japan with its pornographic industry and adult video idols, so as to deprecate it. For instance, one Weibo post mentioned that:

‘Sino-Japanese relations would improve as long as Sola Aoi [a Japanese adult video idol

who is very popular among Chinese young people] *could serve as Japanese ambassador to China*. (Sina Weibo, 2011)

Another Weibo post, which received numerous reposts, contained even more vulgar and indecent language, referring to the Japanese national flag as a woman's sanitary pad. It wrote:

'Do you know why the advertisement of sanitary pads often use blue colour to represent menstruation? Because if they use red colour, it will definitely affect Sino-Japanese relations, hahaha.' (Sina Weibo, 2011)

While the above comments were likely to have had little political impact and showed discourtesy, other emotional, malcontent expressions called for military strikes on Japan and directly criticized the Chinese government's weakness in dealing with Sino-Japanese conflicts. However, such kinds of comments were less likely to have a serious influence because they were likely to be seen as overtly irresponsible. One post mentioned:

'Yesterday is the anniversary of the Marco Polo Bridge incident [7th July 1937], which officially marked the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War. But the Chinese government did not memorialize it at all! The Chinese state supposes that the Sino-Japanese relations would improve if it does not mention the war any more. How stupid and weak (the Chinese government is)! We Chinese people, wake up! Take up arms and fight! There must be a war between China and Japan in the future!' (Sina Weibo, 2012)

Compared with directly criticizing the Chinese leadership for its weak stance on Sino-Japanese conflicts, using Sino-Japanese relations to satirize the Chinese state and China's social problems was likely to be safer in China's online space because it was more difficult for the state to censor this kind of content. Under this condition, the emotional, malcontent expressions conveyed critical meaning without directly employing politically negative or sensitive words, which allowed their posts to successfully survive in the Chinese government's automated, word filtering software. For instance, one Weibo post wrote that 'China's City Urban Administrative and Law Enforcement Bureau (*chengguan*) will definitely recapture the Diaoyu islands' (Sina Weibo, 2012), which satirized *chengguan* as China's most powerful fighting force and darkly referred to the abuse of power by them. Another post mentioned: 'I don't think China should get involved in Japan's post-earthquake

reconstruction. Sino-Japanese relations will deteriorate if the wind blows down the house built by the Chinese construction brigade' (Sina Weibo, 2011). This post satirized the poor quality of the Chinese engineering and construction industry.

The existence of the emotional, malcontent expressions on Sina Weibo illustrated the increased tolerance of the Chinese government for angry sentiment in China's political communication space. Studies have used the concept of the 'safety valve' to explain the Chinese state's leniency from an instrumental perspective (Cairns & Carlson, 2016; MacKinnon, 2011). They suggested that once China's leaders sensed that the Chinese public were enraged, they realized the need for a 'safety valve' through which such anger could be vented in order to prevent it from leading to greater social instability or turning even more sharply against the state. Because the criticisms and complaints have been restricted to specific topics, such as Japan and China's policy towards Japan, they could act as safety valves, allowing people's anger to be diffused and diverting attention from underlying systemic issues, including the deepening income gap, environmental degradation, and corruption. The approach of networked authoritarianism (MacKinnon, 2011) echoed the concept of the 'safety valve', suggesting that the key to maintaining legitimacy and stability is not total suppression of online speech and criticism; rather, by allowing limited degrees of freedom of communication from specific groups of people and on specific issues, social grievances are more likely to be diffused and dispersed.

5.2.2 The Rational, Constructive Perceptions: 'Everyone is Responsible for This Country'

The rational, constructive perceptions were likely to be the closest to the traditional, Western concept of the deliberative public who actively develop and express their opinions on various points of view, and think critically about mainstream discourses and the government's decision-making processes. The content analysis showed that approximately a third of microbloggers' communicative practices (33.53%, $n = 4,913$) were categorized into this type.

A prominent group among the rational, constructive perceptions was the microblogger who acted as the 'amateur international affairs specialist' when discussing Sino-Japanese relations by comprehensively reviewing the history and current situation of Sino-Japanese conflicts, analysing the geopolitics between China, Japan and the United States, as well as providing solutions and directions for improving China-Japan relations. Their posts sometimes echoed the mainstream narrative while at other times offered alternative viewpoints. However,

although their opinions differed from those of the Chinese government, the amateur international affairs specialists usually did not strongly challenge the state. The understanding of the traditional, Confucian roots of mass deliberation in contemporary China helps to explain the practices and attitudes of these amateur international affairs specialists in China's digital sphere. Because the inner motivation of this group appeared to be consistent with a traditional Confucian ideology of 'everyone is responsible for his country (*guojia xingwang pifu youze*)', they defined themselves as the 'helpers' rather than the challengers of the state, and hoped to contribute their thoughts to the decision-making process. Therefore, their commentaries conveyed a constructive, moderate and rational tone that understated or did not mention the government's faults.

Some comments sought to investigate the underlying reasons for the deteriorated Sino-Japanese relations, discussing the causes from the perspective of a power transition and the US's involvement. For instance, many posts commented as follows:

'The conflict between China and Japan is an inevitable result of a power transition in East Asia. The rise of China will lower Japan's relative power, and as a result, the Japanese would feel fear due to the relative decline in their power.' (Sina Weibo, 2015)

'The nature of Sino-Japanese conflict is fighting for the leadership of Asia in the next decades. China's economic development challenges the previous leadership of Asian, Japan. Therefore, the competition and conflict will continue in the foreseeable future.' (Sina Weibo, 2015)

'Sino-Japanese relations are never pure bilateral relations. The US's involvement should be taken into consideration. A rising China will challenge the leadership of the US in the Asia-Pacific region. The US actively uses Japan to counterbalance China and is willing to allow the conflicts between China and Japan.' (Sina Weibo, 2015)

'The deep-rooted contradiction between Japan and the US affects Sino-Japanese relations. Japan has been under the US's military protection in the post-war era. As Prime Minister Abe seeks to turn Japan into a 'normal country', the most significant objective of his government is to get rid of the dependence on the US. Currently, confronting China is a perfect excuse for Japan to develop its own military power without enraging the US

because the US also sees China as its main rival in Asia. ' (Sina Weibo, 2013)

These Weibo posts illustrated well the reflexively deliberative function of the digital media in China's political communication space. These Chinese online voices were less inclined to free use labels of 'Japanese devils'; rather, they deliberately and pragmatically consider the bilateral relations between China and Japan. These netizens can access various information sources, then compare, criticize and integrate them, and develop personally distinctive ideas. The processes of such information consumption, re-creation and dissemination have been mainly through digital communication platforms (e.g., Medaglia & Yang, 2017; Stockmann & Luo, 2015).

Some rational, constructive perceptions extended the debate on China's domestic affairs and investigated the underlying social problems reflected in its vulnerable foreign relations. They also called for the abandonment of viewing Japan as a one-sided 'aggregator' and for the construction of a comprehensive understanding of Japanese domestic society and its international relations. Some posts introduced Japanese society and culture, suggesting that Japan has prevailed over China in many social aspects, such as orderliness, punctuality, innovation capability, and consciousness in protecting the environment and energy conservation. They pointed out that China should learn from Japan in these fields so as to better develop itself, rather than focusing on national tensions, which has made no contribution to contemporary bilateral relations or China's domestic development. For instance, two Weibo posts wrote:

'We should develop our domestic comics rather than criticize Japan's 'manga invasion'. Narrowing the consumer of comics to children is partial. The Japanese manga industry considers all age cohorts as potential audience. The Chinese comic industry should learn from Japan.' (Sina Weibo, 2016)

'It is reasonless to boycott Japan's products when Sino-Japanese relations become bad. The Chinese companies should draw lessons from this enterprise culture of innovativeness since China is viewed as the 'world's factory' but lacks original brands or products. That is the only way China can become really prosperous and strong.' (Sina Weibo, 2014)

The results of the content analysis found a fierce debate on Sina Weibo between the

emotional, malcontent expressions and the rational, constructive perceptions of the meaning of (real) patriotism, which showed a strong, reflexive feature of mass deliberation in China's political communication space. While the emotional, malcontent expressions claimed to be patriots and condemned the public who held moderate or friendly attitudes toward Japan as traitors of the Chinese nation, the rational, constructive perceptions suggested the blind and radical anti-Japanese sentiments among the Chinese public were 'hurting the country, not loving it' because they have damaged Chinese social stability and its international image. Two representative posts regarding the emotional/rational debates were:

'I cannot believe that today there are still so many traitors of the Chinese nation! Those who think we should be friendlier towards Japan are nothing but fools and sinners.' (Sina Weibo, 2012)

'Do those guys who usually vent their anger towards Japan on the Internet live 70 years ago? It's 2015, not 1945. History is just history. Bringing the past war to contemporary foreign relations and expressing negative and derogatory rhetoric can do nothing but show your rudeness and irrationality—which may ultimately damage China's national image.' (Sina Weibo, 2015)

The debate about the real meaning of patriotism can be investigated from the approach of the nuanced effects of digital communication technologies on public discussion. While deliberation studies have viewed the Internet and social media as virtual venues for pluralistic and rational communication, scholars researching selective exposure and political polarization have demonstrated a rather polarized form of public discussion on digital platforms (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2012; Prior, 2013; Song & Boomgaarden, 2017). Based on a preconception from social psychology that people prefer to form groups among those with whom they agree, scholars have suggested that the way participants discuss and interact with each other in relation to the polarization of their opinions (positive vs. negative) (Song & Boomgaarden, 2017). Findings have linked the observed phenomenon of homophily to a fragmentation of the public into divided, electronic communities made up of groups that tend to self-segregate (Iyengar et al., 2012). As a result, homogeneous groups tend to polarize, and thus radicalize their positive or negative sentiments (Prior, 2013).

The ongoing confrontations between the emotional, malcontent expressions and rational advocators illustrated the dual effects of the mass deliberation and network polarization of digital communication in China's political communication space. On the one hand, the digital space has significantly decentralized and diversified the Chinese public's view of Japan. Historically, the way Chinese citizens viewed Japan has changed according to different political situations and China's policy towards Japan, from considering Japan as an aggressor and enemy in the 1950-60s to seeing it as a friendly neighbour and helper of China's modernization in the 1970-80s, then re-raising the Japanese invasion of China in the context of China's patriotism campaign since the early 1990s. However, 'horizontally', across different periods, China's inner society has held a relatively united viewpoint of Japan, which has paralleled the official narratives (Cairns & Carlson, 2016). The emergence of digital information dissemination and networked communication has provided alternative viewpoints, which have complemented, re-enforced or challenged the normative discourses on Japan, thereby facilitating public deliberation. On the other hand, the self-confrontation and self-division of public opinion toward Japan have promoted people to engage in the groups that share their same values, sentiments and viewpoints of Japan and reject persuasion from the opposite side. Therefore, the controversy between differently minded people has become wider and the difference between similarly minded individuals has become smaller. From this perspective, the Chinese net users have polarized and radicalized their hostile or favourable sentiments toward Japan.

5.2.3 Positive Energy Transmissions: A Voluntary, Pro-government Voice

The content analysis showed that another remarkable and unique dimension of reflexive deliberation in China's cyberspace was 'positive energy transmissions'. 'Positive energy' (*zhengnengliang*) is a new, catchy phrase the Xi Jinping administration has used to regulate news, arts, and culture, which emphasizes the importance of encouraging positive attitudes and uplifting content as opposed to critical and negative views, particularly with online political expression (Bandurski, 2014). Since its emergence, the phrase of 'transmitting positive energy' has been widely adopted by Chinese officials and the public to show their 'political correctness' of supporting the government's policy of information and communication management. Therefore, this chapter classified online posts those convey pro-government viewpoints as 'positive energy transmissions'. While the Western notion of deliberation usually considers that the public sphere can engender rational-critical discourse that can serve as a critical check on the state (Asen & Brower, 2001), stories on Sina Weibo

showed some differences, with just under one-fifth (17.78%, $n=2,605$) of online posts showing a trusting and satisfied attitude towards the government.

Positive energy transmissions on Sina Weibo involved two distinctive types in terms of the content and stances regarding Japan, but shared a common feature of mirroring the Chinese state's narrative on Sino-Japanese relations. The first type of positive energy transmissions appealed for the strengthening of governmental cooperation and people-to-people friendship between China and Japan, which was highly consistent with the official Chinese media's discourse of building stable and benign bilateral relations. The second type, in contrast, mentioned the Sino-Japanese conflicts and disagreements with an emphasis on justifying the Chinese government's legitimacy and claims in a series of bilateral disputes. In general, positive energy transmissions provided counter narratives to emotional, malcontent expressions and helped to balance the online complaints and the cynical and angry sentiments regarding Sino-Japanese relations and the Chinese government's policy towards Japan.

Many microbloggers expressed their sincere wish to improve Sino-Japanese relations, posting comments, such as:

'A pair of giant pandas from China arrived at their new home in Tokyo. I hope those pandas act as ambassadors for peace and help China-Japan ties.' (Sina Weibo, 2011).

'I just watched the latest news of the Japanese earthquake and felt so sad. Let's put prejudice aside. We should provide help to Japanese people. I hope the natural disaster will not happen again and Sino-Japanese relations become better.' (Sina Weibo, 2011)

'China and Japan should strengthen cooperation because we all belong to the East Asian community. We share common interests and face common challenges. We are neighbors and partners rather than rivals or enemies.' (Sina Weibo, 2015)

'Neither the Chinese nor Japanese people should pay the price for the past war. We should emphasize the economic complementarity of China and Japan and construct future-oriented bilateral relations. It is in accordance with the common interests of the two countries.' (Sina Weibo, 2016)

The content analysis of the Sina Weibo posts on Sino-Japanese relations revealed the significant impact of globalization and regionalization on China's political communication space. In this highly globalized and regionalized era, numerous Japanese people work, study and live in China, and vice versa. The increasing people-to-people exchanges between China and Japan have considerably improved the mutual understanding and trust, and this interaction and interdependence has been well reflected in the media space. A lot of microbloggers mentioned their personal experiences of contact with Japanese people and held a generally amiable impression of them. Therefore, they were more inclined to accept and echo the Chinese government's narrative of establishing friendlier and more stable Sino-Japanese relations. For instance, one post wrote:

'My neighbor is a Japanese man who married a Chinese woman thirty years ago. He loves his Chinese wife so much and is very friendly to Chinese people. I hope all the ordinary people from China and Japan could put the historical controversy aside and become sincere friends.' (Sina Weibo, 2014)

Another type of positive energy transmission mentioned the bilateral conflicts and disagreements between China and Japan, rather than friendship and cooperation, holding uncritical and supportive attitudes towards the Chinese state. Their aim and emphasis were to justify the Chinese government's legitimacy and claims in a series of bilateral disputes, and glorify the power and prosperity of contemporary China. In this case, the 'positive energy' could be viewed as 'politically correct energy'. Some posts were written as follows:

'Sino-Japanese conflicts are good for China. The existence of a powerful rival (Japan) would stimulate our motherland to become better! Come on great China!' (Sina Weibo, 2013)

'The Diaoyu/Senkaku boat collision illustrated that China has had the initiative in its hands. It is a welcome indication. Our nation and government have become more active and powerful in foreign affairs.' (Sina Weibo, 2012)

'No matter what we do, the Western media may criticize us. Therefore, the Chinese government does not need to care about their [the Western media] comments, just act in accordance with China's national interest and the international law.' (Sina Weibo, 2014)

The analyses of the positive energy transmissions in China's political communication space were likely to illustrate the existence of pro-government and pro-official discourse voices in China's online space. Some recent studies demonstrate that in the Chinese context, commercial- or new media-facilitated mass deliberation and civic participation can coexist, and even positively interact with the existing political systems (e.g., Guo, 2017; Han, 2015; Li et al., 2016). For instance, Guo (2017) explored the use of a social media application, WeChat, among older Chinese adults and its political implications in Chinese society. Her findings demonstrated that WeChat exposed many older Chinese adults to controversial information and viewpoints that were critical of the official discourse. However, the majority of Wechat users were labeled by Guo (2017) as 'filters' who read less alternative information because they were critical of such content and were more inclined to produce and spread messages that supported the mainstream discourse. Li and his colleagues (2016) found the compatibility between civic culture and system support in Chinese online ecology. They suggest social media-based political discussion does not undermine system support, they argue, even suggesting that it is strongly related to optimism about the Chinese government. Similarly, Wang and Shen's (2017) findings illustrate that online criticism leads to an increase in perceived communication freedom and citizens' satisfaction rather than dissatisfaction with government in China. The Chinese context, with its traditional culture and censored media environment, provides two explanations for this 'criticism-leads-to-satisfaction' viewpoint. First, in feudal China, an emperor who was willing to listen to the public was considered a benevolent emperor and received public praise (Zhang & Sun, 2011). Therefore, tolerance towards critical comments at that time would be regarded as an indicator of good governance, fostering a positive assessment of the authority. In addition, in the context of the present decade-long censored environment, grassroots criticism of the government signals a loosened control on information flow, which will be taken as a sign of protecting citizens' freedom of speech and therefore exerting positive influence on political judgment (Wang & Shen, 2017).

Even though Chinese citizens now live in a digitally connected age in which the public can access politically alternative information, going online has not automatically meant that those who consent reveal discontent. By contrast, people who hold a pro-government attitude subjectively and spontaneously produce and disseminate information to echo the official narrative, and refute or report critical and negative content. This is not to suggest that digital communication technology and information diversity have not changed the civic culture in

China, but rather, that the changes have been more moderate than expected. Since a change of mind has usually taken place more slowly than a change in technology, it is likely that a longer time is needed to transform a previously obedient public into a critical one.

5.2.4 The Self-interested Viewpoints: Confrontations between the Politically Enthusiastic and the Indifferent

The fourth important category of reflexive deliberation in China's political communication space was the 'self-interested viewpoints'. By contrast to the rational analysis posts, positive energy transmissions and emotional reviler who showed strong personal attitudes, interests and opinions toward Sino-Japanese relations, the self-interested viewpoints demonstrated a distinct, apolitical feature but was the largest group on Sina Weibo who accounted for 38.19% ($n = 5,597$) of the total sampling. Although the self-interested viewpoints mentioned content related to Japan, their posts conveyed a disinterest in politics and China's foreign relations and were concerned about the negative impact of deteriorated Sino-Japanese relations on their personal lives, such as their tourist plans to Japan.

To some young generations in China, Japan has represented TV dramas, superstars, shopping paradise and tourist resorts, rather than a politically sensitive neighbouring country that has had a long-term feud with China. However, these people were not strongly against the Chinese government's narrative on this issue; rather, they respected and tried to obey the political and social norm of Chinese society in which anti-Japanese sentiment has been a widely shared ideology. Therefore, the emphasis of the self-interested viewpoints on Sino-Japanese relations were on their personal affiliation with the Japanese culture or products, without providing a political opinion or challenging the official narrative on Japan. For instance, some posts wrote:

'The news just reported that China and Japan are going to establish a closer relationship in the economy, politics and culture aspects. It's great! Maybe my idol, Ayumi Hamasaki, will have a concert in China soon!' (Sina Weibo, 2011).

'When will Sino-Japanese relations improve? I have to cancel my tourist plans to Japan due to the Diaoyu/Senkaku territorial dispute. My colleagues and friends will call me 'traitor' if I go to Japan for shopping now!' (Sina Weibo, 2011)

Although some self-interested viewpoints culturally affiliated themselves with Japanese pop culture or high-quality products and held an indifferent attitude toward Japan from a political perspective, there were other bystanders who thought they had nothing to do with national affairs, or even felt antipathy toward the topic of Sino-Japanese relations. This kind of self-interested perception viewed people who were enthusiastic about discussing Sino-Japanese relations as being idle. For example, one post stated:

'I am so envious of people who are concerned with Sino-Japanese relations. They must have already paid off the house loan and had a nice car; therefore, they have a leisurely mood to pay attention to foreign affairs that have nothing to do with them. However, poor people like me have to work hard and make a living, and have no spare time to think about whether the Japanese government has sincerely apologized or not.' (Sina Weibo, 2011)

It is important to include the self-interested viewpoints in the discussion of China's public deliberation rather than simply view them as 'apolitical' and ignore them because this study suggested that the Chinese people's increasing indifference to politics could be partly attributed to mass deliberation. In Mao's era, Chinese people were considered to be politically enthusiastic because of the influence of continuous political propaganda and mass campaigns (e.g., Lynch, 1999; Zhao, 1998). However, the changing social and economic environment accompanied by digital communication has successfully introduced and disseminated the ideologies of individualism, consumerism, and money worship (Shirk, 2011; Stockmann, 2013). Through deliberation, these ideas have competed with the government-promoted collectivism and patriotism which may have moved many ordinary people away from politics.

In Western contexts, some studies have suggested that traditional forms of political participation have declined in recent decades (Putman, 2000; Swyngedouw, 2014), while the self-interested viewpoints in Sina Weibo illustrated that the 'apolitical' trend has emerged in China as well. The increasing individualism and attitude of despair of alternative politics are two narratives that may help to explain this de-politicization. Scholars have argued that this 'apolitical' tendency demonstrates a declining civic virtue and increasing individualism, positing that there has been a shift from a recent past of civic engagement, community spirit and collective public discussion to a present marked by disengagement and individualization (e.g. Putman, 2000). Under the dual contexts of China's high-speed economic growth and the collapse of communist ideology, individualism has prevailed in Chinese society, carrying the

concept of ‘money as the first priority’. There has been a considerable number of people who care only about their personal, material lives, such as their home mortgage, car loan, and income. They stay out of seriously discussing or engaging in politics. Some of them complain about political issues through digital platforms but without devoting emotion or thought, while others believe that mentioning political matters is a waste of time (Chen & Reese, 2015; Hadland, 2015; Shirk, 2011).

Another viewpoint has contended that the apoliticality should be attributed to the disappointment of alternative politics. They believe the declining passion for politics has occurred in the context of a solid orthodoxy that leaves little room for alternative politics, which forms a perception that the public’s discussion and political engagement make little impact on policy outcomes (Day, 2011). In China, a widely shared viewpoint is that the powerful Chinese state has left little space for public discussion of issues related to foreign relations (e.g., Reilly, 2011; Wu, 2005). A decades-long, highly centralized political system and the suppression of open public opinion have disappointed many Chinese people who support alternative politics, forming an ideology that ordinary people’s ideas about Sino-Japanese relations make no difference to the Chinese government’s policy towards Japan (Hollihan, 2014; Lagerkvist, 2010; Tai, 2014). Therefore, they have become reluctant to engage in political discussion, both on- and offline.

Conclusion

This thesis contextualizes Volkmer’s (2014) research model of the ‘actor, connector and interlocutor’ to explore the political communication arrangement in contemporary Chinese context, defining the China’s official narratives as the ‘actor’ dimension, China’s public discussion on political issues as the ‘connector’ dimension, and the media, political and social elites’ interpretation and re-mediation process as the ‘interlocutor’ dimension. It also suggests that information technologies and digital communication applications have provided platforms for the ‘connector’ dimension and enabled previously passive audiences to subjectively and reflectively communicate with others, and therefore, become connectors. This chapter focused on the ‘connector dimension’ of China’s political communication space—public discussion and deliberation, through qualitative analysis of the digital debate on Sino-Japanese relations from Sina Weibo, China’s most popular social networking site. The results of the analysis revealed a remarkable heterogeneity of the connector’s perceptions in the digital debates on Sino-Japanese relations. The communication practices of Chinese

netizens were classified into four distinctively reflexive dimensions of mass deliberation, involving ‘emotional, malcontent expressions’, ‘rational, constructive perceptions’, ‘positive energy transmission’, and ‘self-interested viewpoints’.

While the Western approach of coupling mass deliberation with liberal democracy has been implicitly or explicitly imposed on research involving deliberation in China, this chapter provided an alternative approach of deliberation with a focus on the Chinese local, socio-political context. It proposed the concept of ‘reflexive deliberation’ and defined it as a ‘self-conflictive’ deliberation resulting from endogenically diversified and contested viewpoints, and leading to the self-division of China’s political communication space. While conventionally, the notion of deliberation views a healthy, inclusive and robust democracy as its ultimate goal, the evidence from this chapter pointed in a different direction. It suggested that, at least on the issue of Sino-Japanese relations, China’s reflexive deliberation might lead to some heterogeneous even paradoxical outcomes in the political communication space, rather than a single, emancipatory and democratizing trend. These outcomes included the emergence of challenging attitudes toward the state that coexisted with spontaneously affirmative voices, widely spread sentiments of strong anger as well as level-headed opinions, and a civic culture accompanied by the trend of de-politicalization. These diverse and opposite discourses, viewpoints and stances coexisted and competed in cyberspace, creating a conflictive context for China’s deliberation which operated largely within a domestic boundary and facilitated the further division and polarization of opinion in the political communication space.

6 The Interlocutor Dimension in China's Political Communication Space: The Authorized Expansion of Opinion Leadership in Digital Spheres

This thesis investigates media-politics dynamics in contemporary China, through considering the Chinese political communication sphere as the vigorous but censored space in which various media participants take the roles of actor, connector and interlocutor in the process of political information flow. The previous chapters have examined the roles and practices of communicative dimensions of monopolistic actor and heterogeneous connector in China's political communication space, regarding the topic of Sino-Japanese relations. The actor dimension—which refers to the original source of news and information about Japan and Sino-Japanese relations—has been exclusively played by China's official media. The content analysis results of China's party organ, the *People's Daily*, demonstrated that through employing the combining discursive strategies of geopolitical fears and geoeconomic hopes, the hegemonic 'actor' of China's official media, set the key themes of 'emphasizing the CCP's contribution to the Chinese nation and strengthened its legitimacy for other media participants' discussion, as well as delimited the boundary of 'maintaining social stability' of China's political communication space. In the connector dimension, masses of participants connect with each other by engaging and deliberating in the online discussions of Sino-Japanese relations, where diverse viewpoints have been formulated and debated. This thesis demonstrates a remarkable heterogeneity of the connector dimension in terms of participants' perceptions and expressions with regard to China-Japan relations, which refutes the traditional 'official discourse vs. counter discourse' dichotomy. To be specific, the communication practices of Chinese netizens were classified in this thesis into four distinctive types of 'reflexive deliberation', involving 'emotional, malcontent expressions', 'rational, constructive perceptions', 'positive energy transmissions', and 'self-interested viewpoints'.

This chapter extends its investigation to the third communicative dimension of China's political communication space: the 'interlocutor' dimension. The theoretical framework of this thesis proposes that political, media and societal elites such as recognizable anchors or journalists, prominent scholars, artists, and celebrities often play the role of interlocutor. This chapter argues that, in China's communication space the interlocutor dimension is a 're-mediation' or 'negotiation' process which dialogically integrates the communication space, links actors to connectors, and guides public opinion through selecting, contextualizing and interpreting official's messages. Through an interlocutor's attention and reinterpretation, news

and issues are likely to be new and discussed by wider and interdependent connectors. The notion of opinion leader is adopted as the conceptual lens of the interlocutor dimension because its key idea is to emphasize that media messages are further mediated and interpreted by a small group of ‘influentials’ and then diffused to the broader audiences (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

This chapter is organized as follows. It first reviews the literature on opinion leaders and its implication in the digital epoch (Section 6.1), followed by the explanation of the embodiment of opinion leaders in China’s digital sphere (Section 6.2). Section 6.3, then investigates the component and online practices of opinion leaders in China’s political communication space, through analysing the user profile of Sina Weibo’s verified users and their online speeches related to Japan and Sino-Japanese relations. The last section discusses the feature of the ‘interlocutor’ dimension and its function in a holistic communication space, concluding that the interlocutor dimension demonstrates the ‘authorized expansion’ of opinion leadership in China’s political communication sphere (Section 6.4).

6.1 The Concept of Opinion Leaders in New, Digital Ecology

Experts in deliberative democracy contend that the new media technologies have significantly broken the hierarchical, one-to-many communication model, facilitating the formation of a more even playing field for previously powerless and marginalized communication participants (e.g. Coleman, 2004; Dahlgren, 2005; Delli Carpini, 2000), whereas the equality of online talk has been persistently debated. While Habermas’ ideal notion of public sphere emphasizes that public communication should be inclusive and egalitarian in nature (Chamber, 1996; Dahlberg, 2001; Habermas, 1989), empirical examinations have illuminated that an absolute discursive equality is just in theory, in both the mass media era and the digital epoch. Therefore, a more practical and widely held viewpoint is that there must be equality of access to the public sphere and that each individual’s view must be treated with respect (Dubois & Gaffney, 2014; Weeks et al., 2017; Karlsen, 2015). This approach treats discursive equality as ‘equality of participation’, recognizing that diverse communication participants’ discursive powers are unequal, and observing that the online sphere has been dominated by some highly active, but influential, ‘minorities’ (Graham & Wright, 2014; Schäfer & Taddicken, 2015).

When researching the practices of those minority ‘influentials’ and their impact on the majority in the digital sphere, the concept of ‘opinion leaders’ has been frequently recalled

(e.g. Dubois & Gaffney, 2014; Karlsen, 2015; Turcotte et al., 2015; Weeks, et al., 2011). The notion of opinion leaders originated from Lazarsfeld and his colleague's (1944) two-step flow hypothesis, which suggests that political information first flows from the mass media to a small segment of politically interested and active people (opinion leaders), and then the interpreted and contextualized messages flow from opinion leaders to the less active section of the population (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). This two-step flow of the communication model refuted the perception of the 'atomized audience' that implies that every member of the audience received mass media content in isolation and that the messages had immediate effects on the individual (Karlsen, 2015). Rather, it emphasizes that opinion leaders who diffused and interpreted messages to their personal networks further mediated media messages.

In the long tradition of empirical research on opinion leadership, different scales were developed based on the original idea of operationalizing opinion leaders by convincing others and being asked for advice. In the mass media era, asking for the respondent's self-image as an opinion leader and a perception of past behavior when interacting with others has become a conventional method to measure opinion leaders (Rogers & Cartano, 1962; Schäfer & Taddicken, 2015). Through employing such measurements, empirical findings showed that opinion leaders exist in diverse social strata and cannot be clearly situated demographically (Hamilton, 1971). Rather, opinion leaders are individuals who are more interested in a given issue compared to followers, know more about the issue, tend to use news media for information more frequently (Troidahl & van Dam, 1965), have stronger personalities (Schenk & Rössler, 1997), and have larger and more diverse social networks (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

The advent of the digital communication epoch and its 'networked' architecture have revitalized the concept of opinion leaders and polarized the debates on it. Some argued that opinion leadership might lose its relevance in the changing media environment. Since digital communication can be specifically targeted at their audiences, fragmented publics and isolated individuals could henceforth be addressed directly and without links through opinion leaders. The result might be a 'one-step flow' of communication (Bennett & Manheim, 2006). In contrast, other studies have contended that digital media connects individuals rather than isolates them, and therefore, opinion leaders can gain its importance. First, the booming number of available media sources and their increasing interconnectedness makes more

complex choices, for which advice and orientation might be helpful (van der Merwe & van Heerden, 2009). In addition, opinion leaders might now be even better equipped to offer advice and orientation for these choices by providing information and opinions more efficiently and effectively via blogs and social networking sites (Erdal, 2011; Kavanaugh et al., 2007; Turcotte et al., 2015; Weeks, et al., 2017).

Although the debate on whether or not opinion leaders can accumulate their influence in a new, digital ecology has yet achieved a consensus, some more easily quantifiable measurements and definitions of influence in online spheres have been advanced. Through using large-scale social data, studies tend to measure online influence by the number of followers on social networking sites (Bakshy et al., 2011; Subbian & Melville, 2011). These studies use social network analysis to compute metrics. The assumption is when a given member of a network (called a node) is placed in that network in such a way that (s)he could be heard by many others also in that network, that node is likely to be influential. The facet of influence that these studies rely on in order to provide an operational definition is having a following (Dubois & Gaffney, 2014). Another approach is to consider interaction in the network. In the context of Twitter research, this approach often involves either counting the times a user is mentioned (Cha et al., 2010) or applying metrics to a re-tweet or mention network (Sousa, 2010). The main facet of influence that these studies are concerned with is being seen as an expert. Using such indicators and measurements, opinion leaders in digital spheres are usually attributed as political, social and media elites, such as media outlets, journalists, politicians, and celebrities (Dubois & Gaffney, 2014; Nip & Fu, 2016). In addition, Karlsen (2015) provided an alternative definition, viewing followers of parties and politicians on Facebook as opinion leaders and suggesting that they are especially active and influential in both online and offline networks. This development has provided this dissertation with conceptual measurements to define opinion leaders in digital spheres.

6.2 Opinion Leaders in the Chinese Context: the Verified Users of Sina Weibo (Big Vs)

While a number of studies devote themselves into developing some operational algorithms to refine the scales of opinion leadership on social media platforms like Twitter (e.g. Cha et al., 2010; Dubois & Gaffney, 2014; Xu et al., 2014), Twitter's Chinese equivalent, Sina Weibo, offers a more simply and clear-cut identification of online opinion leadership in the Chinese context, through developing a unique mechanism of being verified users. As China's most comprehensive and influential social media site, Sina Weibo shows a dividing and

hierarchical nature with its distinction between verified users—marked with a V after the user’s name—and non-verified users (Wang et al, 2014). From the start Sina has encouraged influential individuals such as celebrities, journalists, scholars, public intellectuals and media organizations to set up Sina Weibo accounts, and also offered them the prospect of verification as a status marker and endorsement of their official credit and trustworthiness. Several studies have illustrated that measuring by both criteria of ‘having a following’ and ‘being seen as an expert’, Sina’s verified users are capable of exerting more influence in the online sphere than their non-verified counterparts, therefore, becoming the opinion leaders in China’s digital space (e.g. Creemers, 2017; Nip & Fu, 2016; Schneider, 2017; Svensson, 2014). Nevertheless, here it is necessary to first explain the specific way and mechanism verified users gain their significance and influence—which is highly dependent on, and through, information customizability.

The Weibo posts from Sina’s verified users have been widely disseminated and their influences have been rapidly proliferated through both user-driven customizability—which refers to the microbloggers’ subjective subscription—and system-driven customizability—which means Sina Weibo’s automatic prioritization and display. *Information customizability* (or information personalization) has been considered one of the most dominant elements of the current and future information environment, and various customizability features are extensively implemented by information technology giants such as Google, Amazon, Twitter, Yahoo, and numerous others (Beam, 2014; Thurman, 2011). Dylko (2015) suggested that information customizability could be understood as two types: user-driven (users take steps to adjust their information environment) and system-driven (the information system analyses the users’ browsing behaviour or their online profile and customizes content based on that information without any steps by the users). He also provided the specific examples of user-driven and system-driven information customizability. For instance, Twitter users subscribing to other users, is a kind of user-driven information customizability. When Amazon users purchase several books on the same topic, Amazon displays other books on the same topic in the ‘More Items to Consider’ area, which could be viewed as system-driven customizability (Dylko, 2015).

Among many digital media platforms and products, social networking sites have been viewed as inherently customized or personalized: users begin by selecting which individuals and groups they want to be connected to and receive information from them (Dylko et al., 2018).

Both Facebook and Twitter are fundamentally based on the idea of customizability. Sina Weibo, as a for-profit media product launched by China's Sina Corporation, shows little difference with its Western counterparts in terms of customizing information to cater to the market and users, but it develops an innovative mechanism of 'being verified users' (Svensson, 2014). From the perspective of user-driven information customizability, microblog users tend to subscribe to verified users and receive their information due to their higher credibility and more comprehensive content than ordinary microbloggers. From the perspective of system-driven customizability, Sina Weibo set up a category of 'Hot Topic' in which it prioritized and displayed the latest posts of verified users according to individual users' search and browsing history. Hence, through user- and system-driven information customizability, verified users' influences rapidly proliferated while non-verified users' posts were submerged in the massive amount of information disseminated through the platform. Therefore, in China's digital communication sphere, Sina's verified users who enjoy the rich information resources, high public credibility, and wide online influences, have taken the role of opinion leaders and become a key institution of 'sense-making' on various political, economic and social issues (Schneider, 2017).

Despite having more discursive power however, simultaneously, verified users have been under tighter monitoring and stricter management by the Chinese state, compared with non-verified users—the general public (Creemers, 2017; Schneider, 2017). The influence of big Vs in China's digital sphere was noted from the very start, and the Chinese authorities practiced a series of measures to cooperate with, manage, and even censor and punish those online celebrities. On the 10th of August 2013, the *Forum of Social Responsibilities of Internet Celebrities* held on CCTV television broadcast, hosted a number of online celebrities, including business magnate Pan Shiyi, intellectual celebrity Ji Lianhai, essayist and popular blogger Zhou Xiaoping, etc. In the forum, Lu Wei, the deputy head of the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of China, put forward the seven norms online celebrities should stick to—so-called 'baselines' (*dixian*). Those baselines included respect for laws and regulations, the Socialist system, the national interest, citizens' lawful rights and interests, public order, morality and the accuracy of information. Two weeks after the forum, a *People's Daily* editorial on the 26th of August 2013, echoed the 'baselines' statement, highlighting that 'Big Vs' must not become rumourmonger. Once being viewed as disseminating contents that may challenge the CCP's legitimacy or social stability, those big Vs would face harsh punishment. On August 30th, the American–Chinese businessman

Charles Xue (Alias Xue Manzi), a Sina verified user with 12 million followers, was arrested and publicly pilloried on CCTV. While he was officially charged with patronizing a prostitute, his detention was widely seen as retaliation for his online critiques on China's corruption and political reform (Yang, 2014b). Another case is the sudden censure of Hao Qun's (Alias Murong Xuecun) Weibo account. Hao Qun is a popular novelist and critical blogger. As a bestselling Chinese author, he had 4 million followers on Sina Weibo. While Hao launched a critique of the state of censorship in China, his Weibo account mysteriously disappeared in May 2013. Xue's arrest and Hao's disappearance in Sina Weibo are regarded as a blip of China's authority plan to take back control of public opinion online (Creemers, 2017). Xue and Murong's cases, in parallel with the 'baselines' statement, illustrate that the Chinese authorities are closely monitoring verified users of Sina Weibo who are playing the role of opinion leaders in China's digital sphere. While our content analysis of the non-verified users' discussion on Sino-Japanese relations showed that ordinary netizens' radical emotions, indignant sentiments, and rational critiques towards the Chinese state have been allowed in the online sphere (see Chapter 5), this room is more constricted for those influential big Vs who enjoy strong discursive power over the public.

While a few previous studies have investigated the composition of Sina's verified users by randomly choosing some big Vs to determine their occupations and institutions (e.g. Svensson, 2014), or examining their online practices during specific cases (e.g. anti-corruption campaign, see Nip & Fu, 2016), the significant role opinion leaders have taken in China's political communication space and their interactions with other media participants have rarely been explored. This chapter addresses this research gap, through integrating the concept of opinion leadership into the thesis's theoretical framework and providing comprehensive, empirical explanations.

To recap, the theoretical framework of this thesis views political communication in contemporary China as a three-dimension process of information flow in which Chinese official media take the role of monopolistic 'actor' through providing original, authoritative news and information, setting key themes for other participants, and delimiting the boundary of communication space; the Chinese public serve as inclusive but heterogeneous 'connectors' who connect with each other through subjectively engaging in civic discussion and deliberating political viewpoints; and the political, media, cultural and social elites play the role of 'interlocutor', which dialogically relates actor to connector dimensions and integrates

China's political communication space by contextualizing, reinterpreting official's narratives and exerting influence on public opinions (see Chapter 2). This chapter further proposes that the political, media and social elites exercise this role of interlocutor through becoming opinion leaders in China's online sphere. However, considering the highly monitored digital environment, questions arise about 'Whether or not Chinese online opinion leaders are cultivated or authorized by the state? How do they interpret official's discourse and exercise their discursive power on political issues?' This chapter examines the composition, online practices, and discursive strategies of opinion leaders in China's political communication space, through analysing the user profile of Sina Weibo's verified users and their online speeches related to Japan and Sino-Japanese relations.

6.3 Opinion Leadership on the Topic of Sino-Japanese Relations: Reconfiguration of Discursive Power, Conflict-Prevailing Discourses and Pragmatism-Driven Viewpoints

The content analysis results of Sina Weibo's verified users' online posts of Sino-Japanese relations showed a reconfiguration of discursive power from the offline world to the online ecosystem, through which conflict-focused discourses covering controversies and antagonism between China and Japan have prevailed among opinion leaders in the digital sphere, along with the emergence of pragmatism-driven viewpoints that call for a more rational thinking and policy toward Japan. To be specific, with regard to the composition of opinion leaders, the dual trends of the inheritance and reshuffle of discursive power have been observed. While some verified users of Sina Weibo have significantly benefited from their offline parental bodies and inherited discursive power (e.g. @ the *People's Daily*, @ *Southern Metropolis Daily*, and @ *Voice of China*), not all traditional discourse that was influential in the offline world automatically transformed into the digitally powerful. Some previously discursive 'powerless', such as intellectuals, have seized the opportunity of going online, accumulated discursive power and became opinion leaders in digital spheres. In terms of practices and discursive strategies, a majority of opinion leaders adopt a 'conflict lens' due to political and commercial incentives, reposting news covering Sino-Japanese disputes on a series of historical and contemporary issues as well as the Chinese government's assertive stance, and producing original commentaries and analyses to condemn Japan's behaviours on bilateral relations. Concurrently, there is an emergence of other voices that follow a more rational perception that considers Sino-Japanese relations from a pragmatic perspective among a few public intellectuals, scholars, critics, 'self-media' operators, and those from the commercial sector. The results of the main variables of content analysis are shown in Table

6.1 and summarised as follows.

In terms of the *source* of online posts regarding Sino-Japanese relations, reposts with original comments were the largest group (66.69%, $n=7,236$), followed by original posts (27.54%, $n=2,988$). Only a very small part of the sample conveyed reposts without original comments (5.77%, $n=626$). This finding demonstrates that Sina's verified users have actively engaged in the digital discussion of Sino-Japanese relations, through providing subjective, original viewpoints and competing for opinion leadership in China's online spheres, rather than simply using microblogging as a platform to disseminate content from offline, established news agencies. Furthermore, it found that the majority of the total sample included external hyperlinks (55.18%, $n=5,987$). From the aspect of *influence*, the analysis and statistics showed that the average number of reposts of a Sina's verified user's individual post was 17.79, $SD=60.22$, and the average number of comments was 14.57, $SD=48.43$. While Chapter 6 illustrated that Sina's non-verified users' posts are likely to sink in the information sea (the average number of reposts and comments of non-verified users was .61, $SD=2.99$, and .55, $SD=1.23$, respectively), the verified users' influences showed to be rapidly proliferated. There is a significant gap between Weibo's verified users' and non-verified users' discursive influence, showcasing the hierarchical structure of China's online sphere.

The themes of the Chinese state's policy towards Japan (23.61%, $n=2,562$) and Sino-Japanese territorial disputes and other geopolitical conflicts (21.80%, $n=2,365$), were found to be the top-two oft-mentioned topics by Sina's verified users regarding Japan, followed by Japan's domestic political and economic issues (13.10%, $n=1,421$), Japan's international engagements (11.66%, $n=1,265$), and contemporary Japanese culture and society (10.80%, $n=1,172$). These are diversified debates; conflict-focused narratives coexisted with more pragmatism-driven viewpoints that call for a more rational thinking and policy toward Japan. While the war history and war-related controversies between China and Japan have been hotly debated among Chinese ordinary netizens, this topic was obviously downplayed among China's online influentials with only 6.85% ($n=743$) of the total sample mentioning it. The other two less popular themes were Sino-Japanese governmental cooperation (6.75%, $n=732$), as well as Sino-Japanese people-to-people exchanges (5.44%, $n=590$), illustrating that the cooperative discourses were not only unappealing to the public, but also by political, media and societal elites.

Table 6.1 Content analysis results of Sina Weibo's verified users' online posts on the issue of Japan and Sino-Japanese relations between 2009 and 2016 (N=10,850)

<p>Source:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Original posts: 27.54%, $n=2,988$ 2. Reposts with original comments: 66.69%, $n=7,236$ 3. Reposts without original comments: 5.77%, $n=626$
<p>The number of reposts: $M=17.79$, $SD=60.22$ The number of comments: $M=14.57$, $SD=48.43$</p>
<p>Supplementary data:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Including external hyperlink: 55.18%, $n=5,987$ 2. Not including external hyperlink: 44.82%, $n=4,863$
<p>Theme:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sino-Japanese territorial dispute and other geopolitical conflicts: 21.80%, $n=2,365$ 2. The Chinese state's policy towards Japan: 23.61%, $n=2,562$ 3. Japan's domestic political and economic issues: 13.10%, $n=1,421$ 4. Japan's international engagement: 11.66%, $n=1,265$ 5. Contemporary Japanese culture and society: 10.80%, $n=1,172$ 6. Sino-Japanese War history and war-related issues: 6.85%, $n=743$ 7. Sino-Japanese people-to-people exchanges: 5.44%, $n=590$ 8. Sino-Japanese governmental cooperation: 6.75%, $n=732$
<p>User's composition:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Media agencies: 36.61%, $n=3,972$ 2. Public intellectuals (e.g., scholar, writer, and self-media operator): 31.28%, $n=3,394$ 3. Governmental bodies and officials: 7.00%, $n=760$ 4. Commercial sectors: 5.31%, $n=576$ 5. Cultural industry: 4.29%, $n=465$ 6. Other: 15.51%, $n=1,683$

Although a previous study has investigated the composition of Sina's verified users by randomly choosing 300 big Vs in 2013 to determine their occupations and institutions (Svensson 2014), this chapter provided a more comprehensive understanding of the specific composition of opinion leaders in the digital debates on Sino-Japanese relations by analysing the content and user profiles of 10,850 Weibo posts. The typology and analysis showed that the largest group of Sina's verified users in the discussion of Sino-Japanese relations was the official Weibo accounts of media agencies (36.61%, $n=3,972$), followed by public intellectuals comprising of scholars, writers, critics, and individual media workers (31.28%, $n=3,394$), governmental bodies and officials (7.00%, $n=760$), and those from the commercial sector (5.31%, $n=576$) and cultural industry (4.29%, $n=465$). In addition, users' occupations and institutions that did not belong to these five types were categorized as others, occupying 15.51% ($n=1,683$) of the total sample. While some verified users could be considered as the power extension of established media giants, others (such as those self-media operators) were previously inconspicuous in China's media landscape and had risen sharply in the social

media era.

6.3.1 Media Agencies

The results of content analysis showed that the official Weibo accounts of news organizations was the largest component of Sina Weibo's verified users in the digital debate on Sino-Japanese relations, which made up more than a third (36.61%, $n=3,972$) of the total sample. As many studies have suggested that in today's digital media environment, news institutions and journalism have continued to be a central 'sense-making' institutions which provide resources for societies to understand and communicate about public issues (e.g. Peters & Broersma, 2016; Russell & Waisbord, 2017) In the Chinese context, traditional media agencies which enjoy the rich information resources and high public credibility, have expanded their influences in digital spheres and have become the most crucial opinion leaders in China's digital space on a variety of issues regarding China's domestic affairs and foreign relations.

There were four distinct types of media agencies which pursued opinion leadership on the topic of Sino-Japanese relations through active Weibo engagement, including (1) China's national party organs (e.g. the People's Daily, China National Radio (CNR), China Central Television, and China News Service); (2) China's provincial- and municipal-level news organizations (e.g. Zhejiang Daily, Jiangxi Radio Station, Qilu Evening News); (3) China's nation-wide, commercial media corporations (e.g. Southern Metropolis Daily, Sina Corp, Caijing magazine); and (4) Chinese language, non-mainland media institutions (e.g. Phoenix TV, Ta Kung Pao, Lianhe Zaobao). While the former three groups of mainland China-based media agencies illustrated the inheritance of discursive power in the digital sphere, the emergence and rise of the last category, the abroad, Chinese-speaking media institutions on Sina Weibo demonstrated the opposite trend of capital reshuffle. However, despite being heterogeneous in terms of ownership, organizational structure, profit model and base location, a shared practice for most media agencies on the issue of Sino-Japanese relations on Weibo is the inclination toward conflict-focused discourses while downplaying benign, friendly and cooperative interactions between China and Japan.

It has been suggested that by 2015, nearly all of the Chinese traditional media agencies had established their own Sina Weibo accounts, utilizing it as a platform to expand their influences (Huang & Lu, 2017). Some prominent instances were '@ People's Daily' that

launched in August 2012 and had 51.76 million followers, '@ CCTV NEWS' that launched in November 2012 and had 49.22 million followers, and '@ the *Southern Metropolis Daily*' which had 9.24 million followers by the end of 2016. These Sina Weibo accounts of these news agencies automatically inherited the reputation, influence and audiences of their parental bodies. They represented typical examples of a discursive power inheritance between the offline and online media fields. In addition, in the online discussion of Sino-Japanese relations, China's national party organs' Weibo accounts also inherited the privilege of providing exclusive news and information and, therefore, became a crucial information source for other media participants on Sina Weibo. Moreover, other domestic media agencies, including local news organizations and commercial corporations, are only allowed to select and repost the official media's narratives.

Therefore, the phenomenon of 'news churnalism' could be observed in media agencies' Weibo posts regarding Sino-Japanese relations—which means that news and information they posted heavily rely on 'information subsidies' from traditional mass media organizations rather than original content. News churnalism refers to a type of journalism that relies on reusing existing material, such as press releases and wire service reports, instead of original research, as a result of an increased demand for news content (Knight, 2011; Van Hout & Van Leuven, 2016). In China's case, various media participants repost political news from official news agencies and government press releases. This is different in most literature on churnalism in the Western context, which usually focused on journalists' use of content from the public relations sector (Jackson & Moloney, 2016). Western scholars have commonly viewed news churnalism as resulting from an increased content demand and a declining journalistic quality (Boumans, 2017). However, this chapter suggested that churnalism in China should be understood as a long-term practice of media elites in reporting and discussing significant political issues, which was cultivated in the mass media era but continues in the digital field, but still a decline in journalistic quality.

From a political perspective, news churnalism on Sina Weibo could be attributed to the deprivation of the commercial media's right to independently report and edit political news. Before the rise of social media in China, the Chinese state had announced regulations to govern news information service providers in the online environment. In 2005, the State Council Information Office and Ministry of Information Industry jointly published the *Provisions for the Administration of Internet News Information Services* (2005), which set the

rules that the Internet news information service providers should obey in disseminating news information. These regulations prohibited the commercial portals from gathering news directly, which has forced them to become news aggregators instead of news collectors. They are given the room to amass news from as many sources as possible and package the information in a user-friendly way.

Despite the provisions being published in the pre-Weibo era, they have extended their force and effect into the new social media epoch. As China's official, commercial, and digital-native news organizations launched their Weibo accounts and adopted Sina Weibo as an important platform to expand influence in the digital sphere, the law and regulations that restricted news media's activities on social networking sites followed. In June 2017, the Cyberspace Administration of China published the new edition of the *Provisions for the Administration of Internet News Information Service*, which added various social media platforms to its defines. Article 8 of the new provisions states that an online news provider should separate its services of news gathering and editing from news dissemination, and that non-state media companies are forbidden to gather and edit news of 'political' nature. This regulation provided the context for news churnalism in China, in which the right to produce (political) news and information is monopolised by official media agencies. Therefore, journalists from commercial news organizations and new media companies developed the practice of directly using content from party organs.

In addition, a lack of sufficient financial and personnel support has hindered China's official media in transforming its online news department into an independently operated news provider—another reason for news churnalism on Sina Weibo. Huang and Lu (2017) investigated the practices of the official Sina Weibo account of China's Central Television (CCTV)'s news channel. They found that most of China's official media operated on feeder relationship between traditional linear and digital media, where media contention from traditional media content was directly fed into new media channels. Hence in China, content from the press or TV outputs and their digital platforms display obvious overlaps. Reporters at the CCTV news center are required to submit scripts to the new media department earlier than submitting to the TV program center when breaking news or important events occur. This requirement ensured that Weibo could deliver the stories faster than the TV channels, but meant that information and content disseminated on Weibo and TV were highly similar. Huang and Lu (2017) attributed this content dependence on mainstream media institutions to

a lack of sufficient human resources and financial support. They suggested, for instance, that CNN has employed more than 2,000 people in its new media department and established professional teams in all news-making processes to ensure the production of high-quality, original content that is totally different from traditional media. However, according to their interviews with some top officials from CCTV, until 2016, there were only approximately 10 people in CCTV's new media department who had permanent staff status. Some of them were seconded from other departments. Their duty was to select material from the newsroom to publish on Weibo, and to do follow-up work according to the users' feedback (Hunag & Lu, 2017).

In addition, this thesis found that conflict-focused discourses dominated the media agencies' Weibo posts. Through analysing the *People's Daily's* coverage of Sino-Japanese relations over the past 15 years, Chapter 5 of this thesis illuminated a rather balanced and comprehensive image of Japan in China's official narrative which combined the controversies, disagreements between the two nations with the cooperative accomplishment and potential between the Chinese and Japanese governments and sincere friendship between the two peoples. However, surprisingly, when choosing and packaging the information from party organs, media agencies' Weibo accounts have the tendency to pick up those stories conveying conflict themes while discarding news and content reporting benign and cooperative bilateral relations. To investigate such asymmetrical selections, the concept of commercial nationalism is relevant here (Turner, 2016; Volcic & Andrejevic, 2016; Yang, 2016).

Volcic and Andrejevic (2016) defined the notion of commercial nationalism as a conjunction of two tendencies: 'the use of nationalism to sell (or gain ratings) and the use of commercial strategies by public sector entities to foster nationalism and national agendas' (p.2). While this concept has been mainly used in the field of commerce and marketing, a few scholars from media and communication have applied it to the context in which commercial media make nationalist appeals to attract audiences in a highly competitive national market (e.g. Turner, 2016; Yang, 2016). Studies have suggested commercial nationalism has created the conditions within which commercialized media can be uncomplicatedly dedicated to prosecuting its own commercial interests without being bothered about such old-fashioned regulatory issues as 'the public good,' while nonetheless operating more or less in alignment with state policies of marketization and nation branding that are regarded as in the national interest.

The historical legacy of Sino-Japanese war and the territorial disputes between the two nations are central to the anti-Japanese sentiment in contemporary China (Reilly, 2014). This is not simply a state-lead propaganda effort, but a dynamic combination of top-down discourse promotion and bottom-up, grassroots activism (Hyun et al., 2014). In other words, nationalist narratives and anti-Japanese discourses appeal to wide public consumption in China's digital sphere. To cater to netizens' nationalistic preference, commercial nationalism has developed in China's online environment. Local level news agencies and commercial media companies have identified commercialized nationalism as one of the ways through which their commercial interests can be supported in a highly competitive national market by generating, or embedding already existing performances of nationalism within entertainment formats. Therefore, themes of conflicts were raised while cooperative stories were de-emphasized by media agencies' Weibo accounts. Themes of history of the second Sino-Japanese war and unsettled, war-related controversies which recall the most bitter and traumatic memory to Chinese people, as well as the contemporarily bilateral territorial disputes which represent the 'national core interest', are likely to provoke nationalist appeals and add more newsworthy, and serves better commercial interests.

It is worth noting that while most mainland Chinese news organizations are actively engaged in 'going Weibo' by opening official accounts and becoming verified users, so are established news suppliers in the Greater China region. For instance, *Phoenix Television*, *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Po*, are Hong Kong-based Chinese language news organizations that launched their own Weibo accounts. Among these, *Phoenix Weekly* has been the most successful by attracting 11.38 million Weibo followers (in 2016), which surpassed many of its mainland Chinese counterparts. In another case, *Lianhe Zaobao*, a Singapore-based newspaper and the only overseas Chinese-language newspaper that can be purchased in the major cities in mainland China, also opened a Weibo account that attracted 1.74 million followers. These news agencies focused their attention on a variety of China's domestic affairs and foreign policies, especially China's relations with world powers and its Asian neighbours.

Media institutions abroad that were allowed to launch Weibo accounts were usually deemed by the Chinese authorities as 'friendly' toward China. This is verified by examining the users' profile. Despite occasional deviation from China's official discourse, their alternative viewpoints often do not fundamentally challenge the Chinese state's position or viewpoint.

For instance, @ Zaobaowang, the official Weibo account of Singapore-based *Lianhe Zaobao*, posted a comment that cited China's Foreign Minister Wangyi's speech of 'Japan is turning the pedal back on war-related issues' (@Zaobaowang 08/03/2016). It was interesting that within this post, @Zaobaowang added a GIF showing a car that kept reversing until it fell from a terrace. By illustrating this GIF, @Zaobaowang implicitly supported China's view that Japan would eventually pay the price if it were to continue falsifying war-related history. When reporting Sino-Japanese relations, those abroad media agencies often adopt a conflict-driven perspective as well. What distinguished them from domestic Chinese media is that the abroad news organizations' Weibo accounts often introduce dissent and antagonistic sentiments from both sides of China and Japan, illustrating that deteriorating bilateral relations were a macronosia and severe challenge to the Asia-Pacific region.

These non-mainland Chinese media institutions could not be viewed as 'powerless media', given that they have already established strong reputations in their respective market and enjoyed a stable following before they even launched their Weibo accounts. However, by entering the Weibo sphere, they successfully achieved what their Western counterparts—such as the BBC and CNN—could not: becoming alternative voices from outside China on China's domestic politics and foreign relations. The latter were completely barred from operating in the Weibo sphere. From the perspective of information exposure to China's microbloggers, at a minimum these Chinese language, non-mainland media institutions achieved a discursive power reshuffle and joined the club of opinion leaders in China's political communication space.

6.3.2 Public Intellectuals

Public intellectuals, including scholars, writers, critics, and individual media workers occupied the second largest group (31.28%, $n= 3,394$) of Sina's verified users in the digital debate of Sino-Japanese relations. They constitute a significant part of opinion leadership on this issue in China's cyberspace. While the media agencies' Weibo configuration showed a dual trend of inheritance and reapportionment of discursive power from the offline to online world, public intellectuals' online presences mainly illuminated the reshuffling of opinion leadership. While a few well-known writers and international relations (IR) experts have opened their Weibo accounts and actively promoted their viewpoints, many previously inaudible individuals including news workers, scholars, amateur essayists, and self-media, used Sina Weibo as a platform to launch their voices, which achieved considerable discursive

power in the digital media field and therefore, exerted influence on public opinions. The online posts by those public intellectuals demonstrated a fierce competition between two contrasting propositions regarding China's foreign policy and its relations with Japan, with one referring to a more ambitious, proactive and nationalist agenda, and the other referring to a moderate and pragmatic claim (supporters of this viewpoint define themselves as the 'knowing Japan' group).

Yan Xuetong, who is a well-recognized Chinese IR expert with close ties to the Chinese government, and Li Ao, who was a Chinese-Taiwanese writer and celebrity, have exemplified the inheritance of opinion leadership by public intellectuals in China's digital. Yan Xuetong is dean of Tsinghua University's Institute of Modern International Relations. As a very high-profile expert in international relations, Yan opened his Weibo account in 2011 and had 130,000 followers, providing in-depth analyses and explanations on a variety of China's foreign affairs. Yan is a strong supporter for China's strategic transformation from 'keeping a low-profile' (*taoguangyanghui*) to 'striving for achievement' (*fenfayouwei*). He suggests that China should take more initiative in international relations even if it may lead to military confrontation with neighbors, especially Japan. Yan's Weibo posts regarding Japan showed to be obviously conflict-focused, shedding light on the Japan-US alliance, Japan's military expansion, and Sino-Japanese territorial disputes. From Yan's view, Japan's image was raised as China's geopolitical rival as well as a challenger of Asian-Pacific peace (e.g., @Yanxuetong, 02/09/2013; 24/05/2014).

In addition to Yan, Li Ao was another famous public intellectual who served as opinion leader in the digital debate of Sino-Japanese relations. As a famous Chinese-Taiwanese writer, social commentator, historian, and independent politician, Li was considered by many to be one of the most important modern East Asian essayists while others criticized him as intellectual narcissist. Li Ao's strong nationalist sentiment and witty writing style made him a popular figure among the Chinese netizens (Cai, 2015b). Li Ao has a verified Sina Weibo account with the name of 'Hello Li Ao', having 10.32 million followers, which was even more than China's most successful commercial newspaper, the *Southern Metropolis Daily's*, Weibo account followers. When discussing Sino-Japanese relations, Li acted as an assertive nationalist given his strong hostility toward Japan. For instance, Li metaphorically suggested that China in the late Qing era (between the mid-19th and early 20th century) was a 'sex slave' (*xingnu*) of Western countries. Japan, as a strong neighbour of China, also actively engaged in

‘raping’ (*qiangjian*) China in modern times. Li criticized the Chinese government’s (PRC) decision of waiving Japanese war reparation when Sino-Japanese relations were normalized in 1972. Ao attacked the Chinese government as ‘stupid’ by being generous to a ‘raper’ (*qiangjianfan*). When commenting on contemporary international relations, Li used the words ‘Japanese devils’ and ‘America’s running dog’ to refer to Japan. Li frequently used profanities to express his indignation toward Japan and metaphorically described Sino-Japanese relations as likened to sexual activities (such as used ‘rape’ to refer to Japan’s invasion of China). This fed to the taste of a large number of net users (Cai, 2015b). Therefore, his posts, which reference Japan and Sino-Japanese relations, have been widely read and re-posted on Sina Weibo.

However, despite his sharp criticism and acid satire toward the Chinese government’s weakness on its policy toward Japan, the Chinese authorities tolerated Li Ao. Considering the way the Chinese government deals with other online critics and activists, (such as Charles Xue and Hao Qun), Li has been given special treatment as a famous dissent writer and commenter. The Chinese government’s leniency to Li Ao could partly be attributed to his political correctness in cross-Strait relations. Li was openly supportive of the reunification of China through the idea of ‘One country, two systems’ proposed by previous Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping (Cai, 2015b). Moreover, while Li held Republic of China (Taiwanese) citizenship throughout his lifetime, he had been a very vocal critic of Taiwan’s ruling parties (both the Kuomintang and the Democratic Progressive Party). His political inclinations made him a popular figure among supporters of Chinese reunification, and unpopular among supporters of Taiwanese independence. Because of his political correctness in cross-Strait relations, Li Ao has become one of a few Taiwanese intellectuals and celebrities who are sanctioned by the Chinese government to possess a public presence in mainland China.

In addition to political correctness in cross-Strait relations, Li Ao’s immunity could also be explained by his subtle handling of the party line (referring to the CCP) in the online space. Li was not renowned for his direct criticisms towards the mainland Chinese regime. Instead, his dissents and sarcasms to the Chinese government and CCP were often cleverly embedded in his denouncing of third parties. There was a logic of ‘criticizing everything’ among Li Ao’s online speeches and posts (Cai, 2015b), from condemning the United States as a ‘rogue nation’ (e.g., @Hello Li Ao, 19/06/2014) to denouncing ‘vicious Japanese devils’ (e.g., @Hello Li Ao, 17/06/2015), from derogating South Korea as a ‘Korean gang’ (e.g., @Hello Li Ao,

17/06/2015) to describing Taiwan leadership as a ‘traitor’ (e.g., @Hello Li Ao, 06/08/2014). Under the key theme of ‘criticizing everything’, Li’s narratives inferred that both the Chinese nation and the mainland Chinese government were morally superior in comparison. Therefore, despite Li’s occasional criticism over the Chinese government’s weakness in dealing with Sino-Japanese disputes, Japanese militarism, rather than Chinese leadership, bore the brunt of his attack. Li was an astute operator who expressed himself through a facade of personal flamboyance, which earned him online popularity and tolerance from the Chinese government by carefully treading the invisible ‘baseline’.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that conflict-focused narratives, like Yan Xuetong and Li Ao’s Weibo posts, have not dominated China’s public intellectuals’ online discourses on Sino-Japanese relations. The emergence of the ‘knowing Japan’ group (*zhipai*) in China’s digital sphere represents the other ideological trend, which calls for a more moderate, pragmatic, and future-looking perspective on this issue.

Although the topic of Sino-Japanese relations has been frequently debated in China’s academic and policy fields over the past decades, it has been given an almost uniform discourse of a conflictive narrative at the public level (Reilly, 2011; Stockmann, 2013). In 2002, following the publication of Ma Licheng’s provocative article ‘New thinking on relations with Japan’ (*duiri xinsiwei*), China witnessed a fierce public debate on its policy toward Japan (Gries, 2005). However, scholars, such as Ma, who called for a more moderate and rational attitude toward Japan, were quickly labelled as traitors or ‘Japanophiles’ (*qinripai*) and their voices became submerged. China’s public sphere had again been occupied by an overwhelmingly negative view towards Japan (Reilly, 2014).

The emerging ‘knowing Japan’ groups have adopted social media as a new, contested arena for the antagonism toward Japan, acquiring discursive capital by providing alternative viewpoints that incurred mass critique and attention. The ‘knowing Japan’ group distinguished themselves from the ‘pro-Japanese’ (*qinripai*) and the ‘anti-Japanese’ (*fanripai*) groups, and branded themselves as authentic experts on Japanese issues. The ‘knowing Japan’ groups were mainly intellectuals comprising media professionals, scholars, researchers and writers. They adopted Weibo as a platform to hold ‘mini talk shows’ and ‘mini public lectures’ that comprehensively introduced Japan’s domestic affairs and foreign policies, expressing their opinions of rationally considering Japan and reconstructing pragmatic bilateral relations.

Two representatives of the ‘knowing Japan’ group are Jiang Feng, who comes from the *Riben Xinhua Qiaobao* (Japan’s overseas Chinese Newspaper), and Feng Wei, from Fudan University, as two representatives of the ‘knowing Japan’ group.

Jiang Feng is the editor-in-chief of *Riben Xinhua Qiaobao*, a Japanese-based newspaper that focused its reports on Sino-Japanese relations and Japan’s overseas Chinese residents. Jiang Feng launched his Weibo account as early as Weibo’s emergence in China in September 2009. Through his Weibo account, Jiang wrote numerous posts introducing Japanese history, tradition, pop culture, the fashion industry, arts, and other aspects of contemporary society—covering Japan’s darkside such as gangdom (@Jiangfeng, 22/10/2014), political scandals (@Jiangfeng, 12/11/2012), and high suicide rate (@Jiangfeng, 02/06/2016), as well as its social progress. In addition, Jiang’s Weibo posts often mentioned his personal interactions with ordinary Japanese from the business, cultural, media and education industries with an amiable tone. His aim from making these posts was to provide a multifaceted representation of Japan and the Japanese to Chinese netizens, so as to replace the deep-rooted image of Japan as the one-sided ‘invader’.

Feng Wei is a professor of Japanese history at Fudan University who holds a friendly attitude towards Japan and strongly criticizes the popular anti-Japanese sentiments in China’s online sphere, arguing that, ‘although Shinzo Abe is a trouble-maker, many Japanese are very kind and conscientious’ (@Fengwei, 2016). Since Feng’s speech usually provoked heated debate on Weibo, some microbloggers labeled him a ‘China’s traitor’ or ‘Japanophile’. Despite often being attacked by netizens with a torrent of abuse, Feng did not close his Weibo account or become silent. In contrast, he acted as a very active microblogger, posting about five daily mircoblogs on Japan and Sino-Japanese relations. One Weibo post expressed not only Feng Wei’s, but also all ‘knowing Japan’ groups’, key view on Japan:

Japan has many people and things which are worth loving but also many people and things worth hating. However, no matter love or hate, a real and comprehensive understanding is the precondition. (@Fudan University Fengwei, 2016)

In addition to Jiang Feng and Feng Wei, some ordinary individuals who are amateur critics use Sina Weibo to launch their viewpoints, being a ‘self-media’ operator (*zimeiti*) and attracting a mass of followers. Some prominent players include @Kelisituofu Jin,

@Yangguan Riben, @Chahaer Xuehui. For that ‘knowing Japan’ group of intellectuals, Sina Weibo has been used as a ‘mini talk show’ and ‘mini public lecture’, which remarkably expanded their online and offline influence, empowered them with discursive power, and raised them as (controversial) opinion leaders (Svensson, 2014).

6.3.3 Government Bodies and Officials

The results of the content analysis showed that governmental bodies and officials occupied a relatively very small percentage (7%, $n = 760$) among the verified users. As authoritative and authentic information sources, the Sina Weibo accounts of these governmental bodies and officials become opinion leaders by their nature (Schlæger & Jiang, 2014). However, these official accounts self-restrained their discursive power in the digital field by taking a low-key and cautious stance in their microblog posts related to Sino-Japanese relations, reposting the Chinese government’s official condemnation towards Japan and its assertive stance on bilateral relations, rather than providing original commentaries or news. The analysis also found that the major Weibo accounts of the government bodies and officials that engaged in digital debates on Sino-Japanese relations were at the local level.

Government departments and officials from the legal system were relatively active participants on Sina Weibo. Some courts, procuratorates and public security bureaus registered their Weibo accounts, and posted and reposted news and comments on China’s domestic and foreign affairs, including Sino-Japanese relations (Zheng & Zheng, 2014). Some instances were @Yucheng public security (Yucheng is a county-level city in Shandong province), @Qingdao public security (Qingdao is also a city in Shandong province), and @Cool breeze Kaifeng discipline inspection commission (Kaifeng is a city in Henan province). However, the content analysis showed that the majority of the government sectors’ Sina Weibo accounts were quite inactive in mentioning Sino-Japanese relations at ordinary times (on average, with less than three posts per year), but became enthusiastic when reposting the statements of Chinese officials and spokespersons’ speeches regarding Japan during China’s Two Sessions (the annual plenary sessions of the two organizations that make national-level political decisions). It demonstrated that many government departments and officials used their Weibo accounts to show ‘political correctness’ and support of the central government’s attitudes and policies, rather than engage in real, effective public discussions (Schlæger & Jiang, 2014).

In addition, the content analysis revealed that the majority of governmental and official Weibo accounts that posted content on Japan were at the local level. City-level accounts occupied 68% ($n = 517$) of the government-related Weibo accounts, followed by provincial- (16%, $n = 122$), county- (9%, $n = 68$), and central- (7%, $n = 53$) level accounts. The central level government sector that published information on Japan and Sino-Japanese relations on Sina Weibo mainly focused on the official Weibo account of the Public Diplomacy Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, @ Waijiao Xiaolingtong. This finding illustrated that because the Weibo posts and comments published by central governmental departments and high-level officials were considered to be representative of the state will, they were more cautious in releasing significant and sensitive foreign affair news than their grassroots counterparts (also see Zheng, 2013). However, even for relatively active participants, the local-level government officials tended to use Weibo to repost the central government's statements regarding Japan, so as to remain politically correct.

6.3.4 Cultural and Business Sectors

The results of the content analysis showed those from commercial circles (5.3%) and the cultural industry (4.3%, including the industries of books, tourism, and education abroad) were another two small components of Sina's verified users in the discussion of Sino-Japanese relations. It also revealed that those from the cultural and business sectors usually hold a more pragmatic and rational attitude on this issue, considering Sino-Japanese relations from the perspective of investigating China-Japan relations' impact on their own field. For instance, one microblog posted by a CEO from an environmental technology company wrote:

When Sino-Japanese relations went bad, China started to rethink its policy on rare earth exports. Thanks for the Abe administration's tough stance, otherwise China would never come to its senses and realize the significance of scarce resources. It is time to change China's attitude and policy on it. (Sina Weibo, 2016)

A microblogger from an education abroad company called for a mutual understanding between China and Japan and suggested that the industry of studying abroad in Japan would take the role of 'the bridge of Sino-Japanese friendship in the current difficulties' (Sina Weibo, 2014). Another verified user from a tourist company suggested, 'the disagreement between Chinese and Japanese governments should not affect the people-to-people exchange.

Chinese tourists still are enthusiastic in travelling to Japan, and vice versa' (Sina Weibo, 2015).

In general, the cultural and business sectors, as previously inconsequential players in China's political communication space (Schneider, 2017), still kept a low profile in the discussion of Sino-Japanese relations on Sina Weibo. They posted comments on Sino-Japanese relations but from a narrow, industrial perspective, without challenging the key policies of China's central government.

6.3.5 The Abstention by Celebrities and NGOs from Opinion Leadership

The above discussion has illustrated that various types of media participants actively engaged in the competition for opinion leadership in China's digital field, involving news agencies and workers, scholars, researchers, and those from business and cultural industries. However, the results of the content analysis also showed the obvious absence of some players in China's political communication field when compared with the Western context, such as celebrities and NGOs. The abstention by celebrities and NGOs from opinion leadership and discursive capital in China's political communication field can be considered in China's special political and social contexts.

Celebrities have become an indispensable part of the public sphere in democracies. Celebrity politics in Western politics mainly refers to the adoption by politicians of communication styles usually associated with popular culture, such as marketing and entertainment, in order to connect with young citizens (Loader et al., 2016). Some scholars consider celebrity politics as trivial and an indication of the continuing decline of democracy (Crouch, 2004). However, others have suggested that celebrity politics should be taken seriously because young citizens may gain political knowledge and moral attitudes from celebrity entertainers, comedy shows (Xenos & Becker, 2009), and their social media networks, as well as from formal instruction (Wood et al., 2016).

Although the rise of celebrity politics has been widely recognized in democracies, it has needed to be re-contextualized in the Chinese context. While the multi-party system has been deeply rooted in Western societies and the main aim of politicians' online activities is to facilitate their campaigns, the absence of popular elections and alternative politics have significantly hindered the emergence of celebrity politics in China. In addition, according to

China's political and social traditions, leaders seldom show a 'human face', because they are likely to keep an authoritative distance from ordinary people. Although many political leaders in Western societies have adopted Twitter to communicate with the public (such as US President Trump's frequent use of Twitter), none of the Chinese high-level officials has opened a Weibo account. Since there has been no real political celebrity in China, its celebrity circle has mainly consisted of entertainment and sports stars, as well as entrepreneurs. Some of China's celebrities have increasingly engaged in public affairs in the fields of environmental protection campaigns, education in poverty-stricken areas, and rare disease remedies (Liu & Goodnight, 2016). However, mainland China's celebrities seldom taken part in discussions on significant domestic political issues or foreign affairs, and were almost totally absent in Weibo's discussion of Sino-Japanese relations.

In addition to the absence of a wide-ranging political engagement by celebrities, NGOs' voices were found to be another significant group missing on Sina Weibo. It has been argued that NGOs in China focused on four areas involving welfare, education, health and environment, and that they were a social media-savvy group that actively used Weibo, Wechat and other digital communication technologies to identify issues, increase their salience, and to monitor a policy's implementation (DeLuca et al., 2016; Zheng & Yu, 2016). However, this study found that most Chinese NGOs distanced themselves from issues regarding foreign relations. The abstention by China's celebrities and NGOs from opinion leadership on foreign issues could be partly attributed to the Chinese authoritarian political context where the state is unsupportive of, and even hostile toward, NGOs (DeLuca et al., 2016). The Western liberal tradition usually identifies civil society as a realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, self-supporting, and autonomous from the state, but Chinese NGOs only enjoy limited degrees of autonomy. In fact, a large number of Chinese NGOs are initiated and at least partially operated by the state (Zheng & Yu, 2016). Therefore, NGOs in China have been strictly restrained within some specific fields such as environmental issues, and are very cautious when delivering political information on social media platforms.

To conclude, an analysis of the Sina Weibo's verified users in the digital debate on Sino-Japanese relations illustrated the reconfiguration of opinion leadership in China's online sphere. As some official news agencies' Weibo accounts automatically inherited the discursive capital from their offline, parental bodies, some Chinese-speaking, world-based

media institutions achieved a capital reshuffle and joined the group of opinion leaders in China's digital sphere. Furthermore, while a tiny few well-known public intellectuals have opened their Weibo accounts and actively promoted their viewpoints, many previously inaudible individuals including news workers, scholars, amateur essayists, and self-media, used Sina Weibo as a platform to launch their voices, which achieved considerable discursive power in the digital media field and therefore, exerted influence on public opinions. The rise of the 'knowing Japan' group of news professionals and intellectuals on Sina Weibo reflected the empowerment of previously marginalized viewpoints. In contrast to these active participants in the digital debates on Sino-Japanese relations, other players, including government bodies, officials, celebrities and NGOs, abandoned or were self-restrained in their opinion leadership.

6.4 The Interlocutor Dimension in China's Political Communication Space: the Authorized Expansion of Opinion Leadership

This thesis suggests that the emergence of opinion leadership in China's digital sphere, as the interlocutor dimension of China's political communication space, has shown the concurrent processes of spontaneous formation and the state's authorization. As the previous chapters have demonstrated, the actor dimension, which refers to the original political information source, is exclusively taken by China's official media; the connector dimension shows an inclusiveness by which the mass public can participate, and the interlocutor dimension illuminates the dual characteristics of expansion and limitation of discursive power. On one hand, the newly formed, multi-group-comprised opinion leaders have dramatically widened the platforms through which people can be exposed to political news and content. In the past, the concept of opinion leader has been rarely examined in the Chinese context because the official media has been viewed as, exclusively, taking the role of 'guiding the public opinion' (Schneider, 2017), however, the advent of the digital epoch is likely to expand the opinion leadership in China to a larger and more inclusive group, as well as diversify its component (Svensson, 2014). While in the mass media era, the Chinese public could not get the viewpoints of public intellectuals or overseas news organizations on political issues until their discourses are reprinted by China's official media, nowadays they can directly and easily reach that information by 'following' those opinion leaders' Weibo accounts. Furthermore, although China's official media still monopolizes the original source of political information, especially with issues related to significant domestic affairs and foreign relations, a majority of ordinary Chinese people expose such content not through directly accessing the official

media's outlet but through opinion leaders' selection, reposts and reinterpretation (Nip & Fu, 2016; Svensson, 2014). During this process, established news agencies, digital-native media organizations, individual media professionals (including self-media operators), scholars, writers, and critics all actively go online through opening Weibo accounts, disseminating news, having followers and being viewed as experts, and therefore become interlocutors in China's political communication space which dialogically associates actor's narratives with connector's discussions.

On the other hand, the more discursive power has been accompanied by more limitations and restrictions (Schneider 2017). The expansion of opinion leadership by no means leads to a free arena where any participant can enter and compete for discursive power. For domestic players, only those institutions and individuals that know the 'rule of game' well, are welcomed—or at least tolerated—in the competition of opinion leadership (Cai, 2015b; Song & Chang, 2016). Their viewpoints are not overly in accordance with the government, however, they know the bottom line of the state and avoid touching them. As long as they do not extend themselves out of the bottom line, their alternative viewpoints and themselves are safe in China's political communication space. This bottom line is actually not fixed or consistent—it constantly changes and evolves according to specific issues or political contexts. However, those media elites—the interlocutors—have expertly understood the bottom line through their online experiences and interactions with the state. For abroad participants, only those who hold amiable and supportive attitudes toward the Chinese government are allowed to engage in the digitally political discussion. The Western-based news organizations, which freely convey critical and skeptical stances on China's domestic and foreign affairs, such as the *New York Times*, VOA, and BBC, have been ruthlessly blocked from the Weibo sphere. Therefore, in this vein, it could be concluded that opinion leadership in China's digital sphere is a kind of authorized expansion of discursive power. Once being viewed as disseminating contents that may endanger the CCP's legitimacy or social stability, the verified users would face harsh punishment and lose their opinion leadership (Nip & Fu, 2016).

In addition to restricting and authorizing the participants of online opinion leaders, a 'power-dependent' bottom line can be observed in terms of discourses and narratives in China's cyberspace. The content analysis results of non-verified users' posts regarding Sino-Japanese relations demonstrated that the emotional, dissenting sentiments which

contained extremely negative and derogatory rhetoric towards Japan and criticized the Chinese government's policy towards Japan, have been allowed in the Weibo sphere (see Chapter 5). Whereas for verified users who enjoy more discursive power and can exert more influence on public opinions such emotional, malcontent expressions and criticism towards authority have disappeared. Previous studies suggested that speeches expressing discontent were permitted, but rebellious actions were not acceptable (King et al., 2013), however, for opinion leaders in China's digital sphere, the bottom line has been significantly raised with that official agenda that could be interpreted and contextualized but not be criticized or challenged.

In general, the interlocutor dimension demonstrates the authorized expansion of opinion leadership in China's political communication sphere. The logic of networked connectedness of digital communication and the mechanism of customized information diffusion in social networking sites have jointly facilitated the emergence and rise of the 'online influentials' in China's cyberspace. Different from in the mass media era when ordinary people accessed political news directly from official media platforms like the *People's Daily* and China Central Television (CCTV), nowadays a majority of public received mediated, repackaged messages from those expanded opinion leaders. Consisted by mainland China and abroad news agencies, public intellectuals (including individual media professionals, scholars, writers, critics, and self-media operators), governmental bodies and officials, as well as those from business and cultural sectors, opinion leaders take the role of interlocutor—dialogically linking the 'actor' and 'connector' dimensions, integrating China's communication space and guiding public opinions through selecting, contextualizing and interpreting the official's messages. Simultaneously, the Chinese state has fully realized the influences of online opinion leaders and implemented control over them. On the topic of Sino-Japanese relations, as some conflict-focused discourses covering controversies and antagonism between China and Japan have prevailed among opinion leaders in digital spheres, alternative viewpoints which are more pragmatism-driven, future-looking and call for rational thinking and policy toward Japan have been allowed to diffuse but severe critical or challenging voices disappeared at all.

Conclusion

Drawing on Volkmer's (2014) model of the 'actor, connector and interlocutor', the theoretical framework of this thesis viewed political communication in contemporary China as a

three-dimension process of information flow. Herein, Chinese official media take the role of monopolistic ‘actor’ through providing original, authoritative news and information, setting key themes for other participants, and delimiting the boundary of communication space; the Chinese public serve as inclusive but heterogeneous ‘connectors’ who connect with each other through subjectively engaging in civic discussion and deliberating political viewpoints; and the political, media, cultural and social elites play the role of interlocutor which dialogically relates actor to connector dimensions and integrates China’s political communication space by contextualizing, reinterpreting official’s narratives and exerting influence on public opinions (see Chapter 2). This chapter further proposed that political, media and social elites exercise this role of interlocutor through becoming opinion leaders in China’s online sphere. It also investigated the component and discursive strategies of opinion leaders in China’s media spheres, through analysing the user profile of Sina Weibo’s verified users and their online speeches related to Japan and Sino-Japanese relations.

The results of content analysis of Sina Weibo’s verified users’ online posts of Sino-Japanese relations showed a reconfiguration of discursive power from the offline world to the online ecosystem, through which conflict-focused discourses covering controversies and antagonism between China and Japan have prevailed among opinion leaders in the digital sphere, along with the emergence of pragmatism-driven viewpoints that call for a more rational thinking and policy toward Japan. To be specific, with regard to the component of opinion leaders, the dual trends of the inheritance and reshuffle of discursive power have been observed. While some verified users of Sina Weibo have significantly benefited from their offline parental bodies and inherited discursive power (e.g. @ the *People’s Daily*, @ *Southern Metropolis Daily*, and @ *Voice of China*), not all traditional discourse that was influential in the offline world automatically transformed into the digitally powerful. Some previously discursive ‘powerless’, such as intellectuals, have seized the opportunity of going online, accumulated discursive power and became opinion leaders in digital spheres. In terms of practices and discursive strategies, a majority of opinion leaders adopt a conflict lens due to political and commercial incentives, reposting news covering Sino-Japanese disputes on a series of historical and contemporary issues as well as the Chinese government’s assertive stance, and producing original commentaries and analyses to condemn Japan’s behaviours on bilateral relations. But simultaneously, a more rational perception that considered Sino-Japanese relations from a pragmatic perspective has emerged among a few public intellectuals, scholars, critics, ‘self-media’, and those from the commercial sector.

This chapter concludes that the interlocutor dimension of China's political communication space showed the 'authorized expansion' of opinion leadership in China's media spheres. Digitally networked connectedness and the mechanism of customized information diffusion in social networking sites have jointly facilitated the emergence and rise of the 'online influentials' or 'digital opinion leaders' in China's cyberspace. Those opinion leaders in digital spheres have taken the role of interlocutor, dialogically linking the 'actor' and 'connector' dimensions, integrating China's communication space and guiding public opinions through selecting, contextualizing and interpreting the official's messages. However, simultaneously, the Chinese government has fully realized the influences of online opinion leaders and implemented control over them (Creemers, 2017). The expansion of opinion leadership by no means leads to a free arena where any participant can enter and compete for discursive power. Results of content analysis has demonstrated that for domestic players, only those institutions and individuals who well know the 'rule of game' are welcomed, or at least will be tolerated, in the competition of opinion leadership. For abroad participants, only those who hold amiable and supportive attitudes toward the Chinese government are allowed to engage in the digitally political discussion. In addition to restricting and authorizing the participants of online opinion leaders, this study suggests that a 'power-dependent' bottom line exists in terms of discourses in China's cyberspace. While for the general public, speeches expressing discontent were permitted but rebellious actions were not acceptable (King et al., 2013), for opinion leaders the bottom line has been significantly raised, where that official agenda could be interpreted and contextualized but not be criticized or challenged (Creemers, 2017). Therefore, the interlocutor dimension of China's political communication space—the expansion of opinion leadership, should be viewed as the 'authorized' one.

Conclusion

This study devotes itself to a well-researched but highly contested topic—political communication in contemporary China. The concurrence of the unprecedented development and vibrancy of China’s media sphere and the communist party’s long-lasting, elaborate information control and manipulation system seems to make a sort of ‘Chinese puzzle’ about media-politics dynamics. Digital communication—because of its low cost and threshold for participants and many-to-many information dissemination model—is expected to have profound democratic potential by empowering ordinary people in relation to the power elites, and a subversive function to authoritarian regimes. Yet China’s experience tells a distinctive story. Digitally-facilitated and bottom-up political possibilities for grassroots and marginalized groups, such as networked connectedness, exposure to alternative viewpoints, online deliberation and mass mobilization, seem to achieve a paradoxical but delicate ‘balance’ with the one-party regime. The proliferation of ICTs and the booming online populations have not significantly undermined the substantial social base for the regime, nor China’s socio-political stability. According to the 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer, even though there is a continuous decrease in people’s trust in governments globally, the Chinese people have held the most trusting attitude toward their government in the world, with 76% of Chinese respondents stating that they trusted the Chinese government (Edelman, 2017). In spite of the occasional occurrence of the Internet and social media-fuelled demonstrations, political uprising such as those we witnessed in the MENA region in 2010-2012 have not taken place in China. This ‘Chinese puzzle’ in the communication field, which refers to the coexistence of dramatic development of digital technologies and Chinese government’s resilience, has attracted scholars’ attention. While most studies attribute the enduring socio-political stability and the public’s generally favourable attitude towards the government to the Chinese state’s censorship and controlling mechanisms as well as China’s successes in national rejuvenation, this study aims to address this puzzle through providing some more comprehensive observations and explanations.

This thesis investigated the media-politics dynamics in China’s communication space using both theoretical innovations and empirical evidence from indigenous observations and analysis. Adopting a case study approach, this thesis used media coverage and online discussions on Sino-Japanese relations to examine the general transformation in, and the configuration of, contemporary China’s political communication sphere, as well as various

media participants' practices and interactions in the process of political information flow. The central argument of this thesis is that China's political communication sphere is a 'vigorous but censored' space where the globally similar logic of networked connectedness coexists with the influences of the Chinese national contexts, and various media participants subjectively interconnect, interdepend, and inter-contextualize under networked but hierarchical structures. Drawing on Volkmer's (2014) model of the 'actor, connector and interlocutor', this thesis suggests that political communication in the Chinese context as a three-dimension process of information flow. Herein, Chinese official media take the role of monopolistic 'actor' through providing original, authoritative news and information, setting key themes for other participants, and delimiting the boundary of communication space; the Chinese public serve as inclusive but heterogeneous 'connectors' who connect with each other through subjectively engaging in civic discussion and deliberating political viewpoints; and the political, media, cultural and social elites play the role of 'interlocutor' through becoming 'opinion leaders' which dialogically relates actor to connector dimensions and integrate China's political communication space by contextualizing, reinterpreting official's narratives and exerting influence on public opinions. This concluding chapter first reiterates the central problem in current research on China's political communication, and then summarises the key findings of this thesis. In closing, it suggests directions for future research on media-politics dynamics in global South contexts, that is: connecting the global with the local.

Overcoming Reductionist Views in China's Digital Politics Research

The study of political communication in the Chinese context has seen a rich period of theoretical and empirical advancement, which could also fall into self-delusions of reductionism, parochialism, and a Western-centric perspective.

Two decades after connecting to the Internet in 1994, China's contemporary media market has flourished and become robust. With 751 million net users, it is the world's largest online population (CNNIC, 2017). There has a dramatic growth of Internet-related products and services with a number of leapfrogging, trend-setting innovations (e.g., the social networking application WeChat), as well as a number of China-based Internet and technology companies with global influence, such as Alibaba, Huawei and Tencent (Fortune, 2017; International Data Corporation, 2017). Within this context, the previously passive Chinese public as receptors of news has transformed to more active news disseminators and producers,

subjectively engaging in the digital discussions of a variety of China's domestic issues and foreign affairs. The established media agencies, as well as political, economic, cultural and social elites have also embraced opportunities brought by ICTs, enthusiastically going online and expanding their influences in digital spheres. Nevertheless, the vigor of China's media sphere has not weakened the Chinese state's overall capability of exercising censorship over society. Rather, the Chinese government has kept pace with times, and is actively adopting digital technologies to update, consummate, and complicate its means of mass surveillance by manipulating information, guiding opinion, and controlling the news (Lorentzen, 2014; Song & Chang, 2016; Zhou, 2017). Sensitive political topics, including human rights, religion, ethnic minorities in Xinjiang and Tibet, have remained taboos in China's political communication space and have rarely appeared in media discourse or the public agenda (Tai, 2014; Wu, 2005). Furthermore, during significant political events, such as the National Congress of the Communist Party of China, large-scale, relentless censorship has targeted the Internet and social media.

The two seemingly paradoxical, antagonistic features of 'vigorousness' and 'censorship' of China's communication space have attracted strong academic interest. Current literature has flourished. Theoretical and conceptual innovations have captured the changing nature of media-politics relations in the Chinese context that are embedded in the profound transformations in China's political, economic, social and media arenas. Some notable works include the notion of 'authoritarian deliberation' by He and Warren (2011); 'networked authoritarianism' by MacKinnon (2011); and 'reversed agenda-setting' by Jiang (2014), to name a few. Simultaneously, empirical analyses were performed on political information flows in the digital epoch, the way different communicative participants network and connect with each other, and the reconfigured power relations among them (Cairns & Carlson, 2016; Fu & Chau, 2014; Hassid, 2008; Huang & Yip, 2012; Hyun et al., 2014; Liebman, 2011; Svensson, 2012).

However, three interrelated forms of reductionisms can be observed in the current literature: event-based, conflict-focused, and internally homogeneous perspectives. First, studies that have investigated the democratic potential of China's digital media have often focused on examining their roles during significant political crises and events (Cairns & Carlson, 2016; Hassid, 2008; Huang & Yip, 2012; Hyun et al., 2014; Liebman, 2011; Shi et al., 2013; Svensson, 2012). However, focusing on web-fuelled, short-lived incidents have the

propensity to arrive at self-serving conclusions which evaluate the ‘successes’ or ‘failures’ of Chinese media emancipation solely based on the outcomes of those political events. These often neglect long-term and moderation effects brought about by media commercialization and digitalization on China’s political landscape and society (Graham, 2015; Lee, 2016; Wu, 2012). Secondly, such an event-based approach has contributed to the conflict-focused perspective—one that narrowly focuses on confrontations that occur within China’s media ecology. Too often, the motivation is to identify the ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in the battle for new information and communication. The extant literature has predominantly focused on the competitive and antagonistic relations between the state’s hegemony over information (through traditional platforms such as official media) and emerging communication actors made up of information providers and consumers (a market-oriented media and digitally savvy public), while unjustifiably ignoring how these different media actors cooperate, complement, and interact with each other. Furthermore, the event-based and conflict-focused perspectives have given rise to the third reductionist misconception which views communication actors in China’s communication sphere as ‘internally homogeneous’. In most studies, these communication actors were automatically labelled and divided according to their socio-political and media identities. They include a repressive and digitally-armed government, a commercial media market that pursues Western-style press freedom and professionalism, the official media which is assumed to doggedly propagate the will of the state and its ideology, and ‘liberating’ social media platforms that are usually equated with the public. However, these categorisations and take-for-granted labelling have solidified the stereotyped image of each communicative actor, and coagulated the fluid social relations while denying the differentiations and conflicts within. As a result, China’s political communication space is erroneously painted as an increasingly antagonistic and polarized one.

These reductionisms reflect the ‘authoritarian determinism’ approach in current literature. The ‘authoritarian determinism’ approach assumes that China’s communist political system is the overriding determinant in media-politics relations. In this approach, the authoritarian apparatus determines the fundamental logic and operational mechanism of China’s communication sphere where multiple participants interact under a censored and hierarchical structure and where coercion/repression forms the backbone upon which the regime controls information flow. As we move into the digital epoch, an ‘authoritarian determinism 2.0’ that focuses on antagonistic relations between the repressive state and digitally armed but

struggling and powerless communication actors, have prevailed under the research framework of ‘liberation and control’. This ‘authoritarian determinism’ approach is based more on a stereotypical perception of media-politics relations in the global South, than on a solid grasp of the socio-political realities in China. Therefore, this thesis aimed to critically reconsider the ‘authoritarian determinism’ approach and the aforementioned reductionisms, as well as to provide a more comprehensive and dynamic understanding of political communication in the Chinese context.

The Summary of Main Findings of This Thesis

Returning to the central questions of this thesis: *how has China’s political communication space been embedded in and evolved with social contexts, and how have diverse media participants interactively engaged in the discussion of foreign affairs of Sino-Japanese relations?* The main findings of this thesis are two-fold, answering the central research questions and representing the theoretical and empirical contributions of this thesis.

First, this thesis argued that China’s national political communication sphere was a ‘vigorous but censored’ space where the globally similar logic of digital communication coexisted with the significant influences of the Chinese political culture, such as respecting authority and emphasizing collectivism, and the Chinese media traditions of strict censorship and self-censorship. Chapter 2 conducted a typology of networked, national political communication spheres, which represents a systematic effort to connect digital communication research with comparative analysis, exploring the concurrence of global influence and national resilience in digital spheres. It integrated the fundamentally homogeneous mechanism of network connectedness which has resulted from media digitalisation and globalisation with heterogeneous configurations of national political communication spaces which are strongly influenced by enduring social contexts. By contextualizing Volkmer’s (2014) model of the ‘actor, connector and interlocutor’, which views public communication as a process-oriented information flow, this thesis used three sets of indicators to classify national communication spaces. It defined three distinctive types of communication space—‘symmetrical and fully-fledged’, ‘vigorous but censored’, and ‘infertile and unresponsive’—and analysed their characteristics, internal logics, and linkage to other communication spaces, and distribution throughout the world. This typology offers a systematic and applicable framework that may be used in future studies to conduct cross-national comparisons about political communication processes in digital spheres.

Moreover, it discards the ‘normative approach’ which views the Western model as the ideal (forward) trajectory and model to be imitated by the rest of the world (e.g., Guo, 2017; Hassid & Repnikova, 2016; Yang, 2014a). The typology illuminates the complex and persistent realities of digital political communication processes in countries of the global South, which should not be viewed as simply occupying a transitory stage in their journey from autocratic to democratic rule, or from a developing to a developed country (Hallin & Mancini, 2011; Voltmer, 2011; Waisbord & Mellado, 2014). Rather, this study suggested that the political communication sphere in countries outside the affluent, democratic Western world can maintain its current operational mechanisms and internal logic for a considerable time and, therefore, it is worthwhile to identify and analyse their specific features.

The results of the analysis chapters empirically confirmed the classification of China’s political communication space as Type 2, that is, vigorous but censored. The influence of globalization and the diffusion of ICTs in parallel with China’s drastic social changes have significantly transformed the Chinese media ecology from a linear, top-down, ‘information transmission belt’ (Shambaugh, 2007) to a stereoscopic, dynamic, and network-connected communication space (e.g., Chen & Reese, 2015; Yang, 2014a). However, this space has by no means been a brand new and even playground for diverse participants. Established power relations, political systems, market mechanisms, and social and cultural traditions in the offline world have jointly formed the rules and logic of China’s digital spheres (Song & Chang, 2016; Tai, 2014; Wu, 2005; Zhou, 2017). The results of this thesis have explained the configuration and inner dynamics of China’s political communication spaces, through the research lens of the three dimensions of actor, connector and interlocutor.

The Chinese official media remain the monopolistic actor

This thesis suggested that China’s official media take the role of the ‘monopolistic actor’ in China’s political communication spaces. This monopolistic position has embodied three aspects in the debates on Sino-Japanese relations, involving the provision of authoritative, authentic information to other media participants, setting key themes in the political communication space, and delimiting the boundaries of political discussions. Volkmer’s (2014) original framework considers the actor dimension as the original resource of information and media content, and suggests that in the digitally networked space, which shows unprecedented openness and inclusiveness, ‘there is almost no restriction on the media forms of the actor dimension, as long as the information can enter the communicative network’

(Volkmer, 2014, p.143). However, this thesis uncovered that in China's vigorous but censored communication space, the role of the actor has been exclusively accredited to official news organisations with issues related to significant political affairs by legally prohibiting other media participants from independently producing original, political news content. Therefore, China's official media have exclusively gathered and edited politically significant news and information and disseminated this content into China's communication space (see also Gang & Bandurski, 2011; Tai & Sun, 2007; Tilt & Xiao, 2010), although some content has been accepted by the connectors and interlocutors and other content has been interpreted, reconstructed, challenged, or even rejected.

To examine the monopolistic actor's narrations of Sino-Japanese relations, this thesis content analysed the news coverage of Japan by China's most influential party newspaper, the *People's Daily*, between 2001 and 2015 (see Chapter 4). Drawing upon the notions of geopolitical fear and geoeconomic hope (Cowen & Smith, 2009; Sparke, 2007), the results of this analysis presented a counter-argument to the prevailing view that assumes that the framing strategies of China toward Japan have been focused on issues of conflict, threat and fear. Rather, the results showed that it was through the combination of the discourses of geopolitical fears and geoeconomic hopes that the comprehensive and multifaceted images of Japan and Sino-Japanese relations emerged in Chinese official media. To be specific, the Chinese official media's discourse of geopolitical fear mainly focused on the historical controversies and contemporary territorial disagreements between China and Japan as well as Japan's active engagement in regional and international issues. In contrast, the findings of chapter 4 uncovered that China's official media's narratives of geoeconomic hope highlighted the cooperative accomplishment and potential between the Chinese and Japanese governments and sincere friendship between the two peoples, as well as the advanced aspects of Japan's domestic affairs.

The results of the content analysis of the *People's Daily* demonstrated that in the debate on Sino-Japanese relations, by employing the combined discursive strategies of geopolitical fears and geoeconomic hopes, the hegemonic actor of China's official media set the key themes of emphasizing the CCP's contribution to the Chinese nation and strengthening its legitimacy for other media participants' discussion, as well as delimiting the boundary of maintaining social stability of China's political communication space. This thesis concluded that through setting themes and delimiting boundaries, China's official media aimed to increase public support of

the regime's leadership and legitimacy, stabilise bilateral relations, and de-radicalise the Chinese public's antagonistic sentiments towards Japan, which were in parallel with the Chinese government's policies, stances and interests on this topic. This thesis also contended that, in spite of there being political parallelism, China's official discourse on the issue of Sino-Japanese relations was found to be comprehensive and informative rather than a pure 'propaganda instrument', which has been the automatic label used by many studies (for instance, Lee, 2000; Zhao, 1998).

Reflexive public deliberation as the heterogeneous connector

Chapter 5 examined the connector dimension in China's political communication spheres, which involves political discussion and deliberation. Information technologies and digital communication applications have provided platforms for this dimension and enabled previously passive audiences to subjectively and reflectively communicate with others, and therefore, become connectors (e.g., Fu & Chau, 2014; Huang & Yip, 2012; Yang, 2009).

Compared with the 'actor' dimension, which has been undertaken by very few exclusive players, the 'connector' dimension has shown a characteristic of inclusiveness where any participants could take this role as long as they (re-) produce, consume, and disseminate political information. This thesis contends that the networked-connected and hierarchical features of China's political communication result in the decomposition of the connector dimension, both vertically and horizontally. On the one hand, media participants who occupy more discursive power have risen (e.g., Karlsen, 2015; Turcotte et al., 2015; Weeks, et al., 2011) and formed a new dimension of interlocutor, and by contrast, the ordinary people, who are the majority in quantitative terms but exercise less influence, remain in the role of connector. On the other hand, interactions with the actors and interlocutors facilitate a diversification of viewpoints that lead to 'reflexive' deliberation among the connectors.

The content analysis of online posts from Sina Weibo showed a remarkable heterogeneity of the connector dimension in terms of participants' perceptions and expressions with regard to China-Japan relations, which refuted the traditional 'official and counter discourse' dichotomy (e.g., Luo, 2014; Zhang & Lin, 2014; Zhou & Moy, 2007). To be specific, the communication practices of Chinese netizens were classified in this thesis into four distinctive types of 'reflexive deliberation', involving 'emotional, malcontent expressions', 'rational, constructive perceptions', 'positive energy transmissions', and 'self-interested viewpoints'. It

defined ‘emotional, malcontent expressions’ as online opinions that showed political enthusiasm by expressing concern with political issues across a variety of China’s domestic or foreign affairs that were driven by strongly and personally indignant sentiments, rather than rational discussion. The ‘rational, constructive perceptions’ were likely to be the closest to the traditional, Western concept of the deliberative public, as they actively developed and expressed their opinions on various points of view, and thought critically about mainstream discourses and the government’s decision-making processes. The ‘positive energy transmissions’ was another unique dimension of reflexive deliberation in China’s cyberspace, referring to the volunteer, pro-official posts on Sina Weibo. The fourth important category of reflexive deliberation in China’s political communication space was the ‘self-interested viewpoints’, which demonstrated a distinct, apolitical feature but was the largest group in China’s online sphere.

While conventionally, the notion of deliberation views a healthy, inclusive and robust democracy as its ultimate goal (e.g., Albrecht, 2006; Baek et al., 2012; Dahlgren, 2005), the evidence from this thesis pointed in a different direction. It suggested that, at least on the issue of Sino-Japanese relations, China’s reflexive deliberation led to some heterogeneous—even paradoxical outcomes—in the political communication space, rather than a single, emancipatory and democratising trend. These outcomes included the emergence of challenging attitudes toward the state that coexisted with spontaneously affirmative voices, widely spread sentiments of strong anger as well as level-headed opinions, and a civic culture accompanied by the trend of de-politicalization. These diverse and opposite discourses, viewpoints and stances coexisted and competed in cyberspace, creating a conflictive context for China’s deliberation which operated largely within a domestic boundary and facilitated the further division and polarization of opinion in the political communication space.

The ‘authorized’ expansion of opinion leadership as the interlocutor

This thesis further suggested that the interlocutor dimension referred to the re-mediation of political discourse and the integration of political communication spaces. It claimed that political, media and societal elites such as recognizable anchors or journalists, prominent scholars, artists, and celebrities often play the role of interlocutor. While Volkmer (2014) defined this dimension in terms of ‘dialogical connectedness’ and a process of rapid responsiveness, this thesis suggests that in China’s communication space the interlocutor dimension is more like a ‘re-mediation’ or ‘negotiation’ process which dialogically integrates

the communication space, links actors to connectors, and guides public opinion through selecting, contextualizing and interpreting officials' messages. Through an interlocutor's attention and reinterpretation, news and issues are likely to be new and discussed by wider and interdependent connectors. The interactions between connectors and interlocutors can lead to some topics becoming more prominent, and the content and narrative of such interactions can go back to the actor dimension, even affecting the actor's information agenda under some circumstances. The notion of opinion leader could be adopted as the conceptual lens of this dimension because its key idea is to emphasize that media messages are further mediated and interpreted by a small group of 'influentials' and then diffused to the broader audiences (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

Chapter 6 considered the verified users of Sina Weibo as the opinion leaders in China's cyberspace, and their selection, interpretation and contextualisation of the official media's narratives fulfilled the role of the interlocutor. The results of the analysis of the user profiles and discursive strategies of Sina's verified users illustrated an authorised expansion of opinion leadership in China's political communication sphere. The logic of networked connectedness of digital communication and the mechanism of customised information diffusion in social networking sites had jointly facilitated the emergence and rise of the 'online influentials' in China's cyberspace (Schneider 2017; Svensson 2014). Different from the mass media era when ordinary people accessed political news directly from official media platforms like the *People's Daily* and China Central Television (CCTV), nowadays a majority of public receive mediated, repackaged messages from those expanded opinion leaders which consist of mainland China and news agencies abroad, public intellectuals (including individual media professionals, scholars, writers, critics, and self-media operators), governmental bodies and officials as well as those from business and cultural sectors (Creemers, 2017).

However, simultaneously, the Chinese state has fully realised the influences of online opinion leaders and implemented control over them (Cai, 2015; Song & Chang, 2016). The expansion of opinion leadership has, by no means, led to a free arena where any participant can enter and compete for discursive power. For domestic players, only those institutions and individuals who well know the 'rule of game' have been welcomed, or at least tolerated, in the competition for opinion leadership. For abroad participants, only those who have held amiable and supportive attitudes toward the Chinese government have been allowed to engage

in the digitally political discussion. In addition, to restrict and authorize the participants of online opinion leaders, a ‘power-dependent’ bottom line was observed in terms of discourses in China’s cyberspace. While for the general public, speeches expressing discontent have been permitted but rebellious actions have not been acceptable (King et al., 2013), for opinion leaders the bottom line has been significantly raised in that official agenda can be interpreted and contextualized but not criticized or challenged. In the debate on Sino-Japanese relations, while some conflict-focused discourses covering controversies and antagonism between China and Japan have prevailed among opinion leaders in digital spheres, alternative viewpoints that are more pragmatically driven, future-looking and call for rational thinking and policy toward Japan have been allowed to become diffuse but severe critical or challenging voices have disappeared (see also Creemers, 2017). Therefore, the interlocutor dimension of China’s political communication space—the expansion of opinion leadership, should be viewed as the ‘authorized’ one.

Two features of networked but hierarchical connectedness and paradoxical balance

Having covered the three communicative dimensions of the ‘actor, connector and interlocutor’ in China’s media spheres, we could then conclude that political communication in China has unfolded in a paradoxically balanced space where various networked media participants connect under a hierarchical structure, and some conflicting elements coexist and accommodate each other.

Hierarchical but networked connectedness has become a prominent feature of China’s communication sphere. The globally homogeneous mechanism of network connectedness, which has resulted from media digitalisation and globalisation, has become ubiquitous in China’s media space (Chen & Reese, 2015). Due to this networked connectedness, information diffusion and viewpoint exchanges have taken place directly and instantly among various participants. For instance, the *People’s Daily’s* Weibo account sometimes reposted content from netizens’ microblogs, and public intellectuals such as Li Ao, who often answered questions asked by ordinary net users. Such direct communication and intensive connections did not occur in previous mass media eras. However, simultaneously, the established power relations, political systems, and market mechanisms in the offline world have jointly contributed to a hierarchical structure of China’s digital spheres. Within this hierarchy, the party organs have inherited the privilege of providing exclusive political information and have become the crucial source for other media participants (Luo, 2014); the

political and media elites have enjoyed more discursive power and have acted as opinion leaders, interpreting official discourse and setting agendas for public discussions (Creemers, 2017), while the public, in spite of connecting to communicative networks and being empowered by digital technologies, most of the time just digest content from the former two groups and usually lose their own voices in the information sea.

Paradoxical balance has been another specialty of the political communication arrangement in China. From a within-dimension perspective, the opposite discourses of geopolitical fear which emphasise Sino-Japanese conflicts and geoeconomic hope, which highlight the governmental cooperation and people-to-people friendship between China and Japan, have been concurrently employed by China's official media, promoting a rather balanced but nonetheless polarized image of Japan, almost like there are two Japans. In the connector dimension of public discussion, the fierce confrontations between the emotional, malcontent expressions and the rational, constructive perceptions regarding 'the meaning of (real) patriotism' illustrated the dual, conflicting effects of the mass deliberation and political polarisation of digital communication. While the digital space has significantly decentralized and diversified the Chinese public's view of Japan, it has also polarised and radicalised the Chinese net users' sentiments toward Japan.

From a cross-dimension perspective, the decentralization/expansion of discursive power and the emergence of alternative viewpoints suggested a freer, more open communication space in the Chinese context. However, the paradox between a freer communication space and massive empowered grassroots, and the Chinese state's unshakeable monitoring efforts with the employment of more sophisticated censorship apparatus, has not always led to conflict. As a few studies have suggested, commercial- or new media-facilitated mass deliberation and civic participation can coexist, and even positively interact with the existing political systems (e.g., Hyun & Kim, 2015; Li et al., 2016; Wang & Shen, 2017), and the results of this thesis empirically supported their findings. For instance, the results demonstrated a prominent group among Chinese net users conveyed rational, constructive perceptions regarding Sino-Japanese relations, who were classified in this thesis as the 'amateur international affairs specialists'. Although their opinions differed from those of the Chinese government, this group usually did not strongly challenge the state. The inner motivation of this group appeared to be consistent with a traditional Confucian ideology of 'everyone is responsible for his country' whereby they defined themselves as the 'helpers' rather than the challengers of the state, and

hoped to contribute their thoughts to the decision-making process. Therefore, their commentaries conveyed a constructive, moderate and rational tone that understated or did not mention the government's faults. Since they have maintained a paradoxical balance, media-politics relations in China showed, and are likely to continue to keep, a durable stability.

A semi-open, porous communication space

In addition to examining the internal logics of China's political communication sphere, this thesis explored its linkage to other communication spaces by considering China's media spaces as semi-open and porous. The content analysis of Sina Weibo's posts found that many overseas media participants had actively engaged in the digital debates of Sino-Japanese relations, including some Chinese-speaking, non-Western media institutions (e.g., the Singaporean newspaper *Lianhe Zaobao* and the Hong Kong newspaper *Phoenix Weekly*), foreigners who resided in China (e.g., Japanese actor, Koji Yano, and Japanese essayist, Yoshikazu Kato), and Chinese living overseas. Viewpoints and political engagements from abroad illuminated that political information flow no longer had been restricted within geographic sovereign borders and could travel transnationally and internationally (Castells, 2007, 2011; Fraser, 2007; Volkmer, 2014). Twenty years after being connected to the Internet, neither China nor the Chinese media have become independent or isolated in the global communication space. On the one hand, issues regarding China have entered the international agenda and provoked worldwide responses; on the other hand, masses of Chinese people have enthusiastically dedicated themselves to global political debates (e.g., the U.S. presidential election, the Syrian crisis, and the global war on terror, see Lin, 2015).

However, this author contends that because of language barriers and the Chinese government's successful blockage of some prominent Western media platforms, including Google, Youtube and Facebook (Freedom House, 2017; Tai, 2014; Wu, 2005), political communication in China has been mainly endogenous. This means that the production and dissemination of political information, viewpoints exchanges and debates have been much more intensive at the domestic level than at the transnational or international levels. When topics have related to significant domestic politics and foreign relations, alternative viewpoints from abroad which have challenged or criticized China's official narratives have had difficulty in entering the centre of Chinese public discussion, despite their exposure to some Chinese overseas and English- and ICT-savvy groups (Tai, 2014). Therefore, the

Chinese public engagement of political discussion has taken place within an allowed domestic space, where previously unified discourse has self-divided into debates due to the diversification of domestic viewpoints rather than challenged or persuaded by external narratives. Nonetheless, with the advancement of the level of English proficiency of ordinary Chinese people and the increasing human migration flow, the porosity of China's political communication space is likely to become more substantial in the future.

Future Direction: Connecting 'Global' with 'Local'

The final remark of this thesis is to suggest directions for future research on media-politics dynamics in non-Western contexts—that is, connecting the global with the local. This thesis investigated how we might move away from the stereotyped 'authoritarian determinism' perspective and rethink the relationships between the party state, various media actors' representations of political issues, and individuals' everyday civic discussions and engagements in contemporary China. Here it is necessary to note that this thesis is positioned as part of a more general reconsideration of the current state of political communication in the Chinese context, and it is inspired by many previous 'de-Westernizing' efforts in communication scholarship (e.g., Chen & Reese, 2015; Guo, 2017; Hassid & Repnikova, 2016; Yang, 2014; Zhao, 2012).

The conventional approach to examining China's media-politics relations usually begins with (perceived) universally applicative paradigms, norms, concepts and premises that have originated from the US or Europe before exploring the different configurations (or disappearance) of these constellations in China's political and media spheres. Alternatively and more recently, some studies in Chinese media scholarship has emphasised the cultural specificity of the Chinese context and believes that investigations of political communication in China should begin with the development of indigenised concepts and methods (e.g., Guo, 2017; Hassid & Repnikova, 2016; Wang, 2010). This thesis engaged with these efforts by integrating globally observed phenomena and logic with China's distinctive political and social imprints and its recent development trajectories in the media sphere, representing the theoretical contribution of this thesis.

It is significantly important to reaffirm that the de-Westernised approach in the research of China's communication by no means suggests that the findings, debates and wisdom generated from outside China should be neglected, devalued or denied, or that arguments and

viewpoints originating between the ‘North’ and ‘South’ (or the ‘West’ and ‘the rest’) should be polarised. Rather, it calls for more critical, cogitative and indigenous reflections on and engagement with the broader, international theoretical and empirical advances.

Bearing in mind this inclusive approach, this thesis explores the ‘global-local nexus’ in communication scholarship by connecting global paradigms with China’s local observations, employing global notions to better understand China’s local phenomena, and expanding global evidence by adding China’s local experiences. Volkmer’s (2014) model of the ‘actor, connector and interlocutor’, which views public communication as a process-oriented information flow, was adopted as the theoretical framework of this thesis and then contextualised and recomposed by considering different social realities. Therefore, this study expands Volkmer’s (2014) original model to include three different versions, which better describe the distinctive configurations of political information flows in various societies. Furthermore, some conventional concepts in communication studies have been adopted in this thesis but were given alternative explanations or focuses, such as deliberation, polarisation, and opinion leaders. For instance, while Western notions of deliberation and its relationship to democracy have been implicitly or explicitly imposed on research involving deliberation in China, which concluded that China’s deliberation has been ‘incomplete’ or ‘authoritarian’, this thesis engages in this debate by proposing an alternative concept of deliberation. It suggests that the Chinese public’s engagement of political discussion has unfolded and has been restricted within an allowed, domestic space, where previously unified discourse has self-divided into debates due to the diversification of inward viewpoints rather than challenged or persuaded by external narratives. Therefore, this study proposed the concept of ‘reflexive deliberation’ in the Chinese context as a ‘self-conflictive’ deliberation resulting from endogenically diversified and contested viewpoints, and leading to the self-division of China’s political communication space. Moreover, while polarisation research has focused on the subjectively chosen logic of digital media that solidifies the public’s partisan viewpoints and stances along the left-right (or conservative-liberal) axis, this thesis found that the different perceptions regarding nationalism/patriotism might also contribute to political polarization at the mass level in the one-party state. Another example is the notion of ‘opinion leaders’, which originally refers to the spontaneous formation of some ‘information influentials’ in both the mass media era and the digital epoch. However, the verified users from China’s social networking sites illustrated the exercise of discursive power through the authorisation of the state. Through contextualization of classic public communication theory,

an alternative interpretation of widely recognized concepts and empirical evidence based on a content analysis of longitudinal data, this thesis contributes to the current, general political communication research, rather than just to research on China's media studies.

In closing, this thesis has its limitations, which opens up possibilities for further research. The limitations of this thesis mainly come from its methodology—namely, case selection, media platform selection, and specific content analysis research methods. First, since this study adopted a case study approach, caution is required in applying the findings to other sensitive political matters based on the analysis of media reports and digital debates on Sino-Japanese relations. It needs to be emphasized here that politics in China has been highly changeable and fluid, and specific issues might be treated distinctively in the media ecology. While some issues have been considered most threatening to the regime and banned by the Chinese government, such as religion, human rights, separationist movements, and political reforms (Tai, 2014; Wu, 2005), the adoption of the case study for this thesis of Sino-Japanese relations as a hotly debated topic of international affairs has been relatively open for media discussion. The scarce presence of some highly sensitive political issues in general political discussion in China, such as Tibet or the Tiananmen Square protests, illustrated that China is far from having a 'free press' or a 'free Internet'. However, an old-style, Maoist censorship has not been the synonym of Chinese media-politics relations. The Chinese government has been capable of blocking and deleting media coverage regarding a few sensitive issues at the expense of lifting restrictions on public engagement and discussion in most non-sensitive matters, involving foreign relations, public policy, corruption, economics, government misbehaviour, and livelihood. This tentative, explorative work aimed to shed light on the general transformations that have taken place in the Chinese media ecology and society, as well as the contemporary media-politics dynamics, rather than include all political situations, especially those of extreme cases. Future research could investigate the variations of Chinese media coverage, civic discussion and engagement, as well as political information flow dependent on different issues, especially on these sensitive matters, and provide a more comprehensive portrayal of China's political communication landscape.

The second limitation might lie in the selection of Weibo in the thesis as the only digital communication platform to represent China's online public sphere. Ten years after its launch, Weibo has been through highs and lows, and many other social networking sites have been developed and gained popularity in China (for example, the more private platform of WeChat

and short video apps like Tiktok). Although Weibo's continuous, explosive growth in terms of registered users and market value and its unique features (such as its hierarchical mechanism of verified users) have made this platform a unique product of Chinese society and Internet culture, taking other digital innovations and platforms into consideration is likely to produce more fruitful insights. For instance, compared with Weibo, WeChat is seen as a more 'private' platform used for interpersonal communication, facilitating small-scale political discussions with acquaintances. The question of whether the same pattern of reflexive deliberation this thesis finds in Weibo is also present in more personal WeChat communication could enrich our understanding of digital politics in China and is a worthy research direction for future study.

The third limitation is that this thesis uses the content analysis method to focus on the flow of political information in contemporary China, but does not investigate the effect of media through interviews or surveys. The research objects of this thesis are media messages rather than human beings. However, because online posts from Sina Weibo were not collected in real time, there is a possibility that the posts from which this thesis's sample was drawn may have been subject to the Chinese state's censorship. Researching individual perceptions, attitudes, and practices through more direct, face-to-face methods, including surveys, interviews, and experiments, is likely to help overcome this shortcoming and obtain more 'uncensored' information. Therefore, future studies that adopt mixed research methods combining content analyses and interviews, surveys and experiments may provide more comprehensive insights into media-politics dynamics in contemporary China.

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Appendices

The specific processes of quantitative and qualitative media analysis are explained in Appendices, as well as the coding form/data collection sheet. In this thesis, a mixed approach that integrates quantitative and qualitative analyses was used, though not simply because the author wanted to diversify her methodological arrangement. Rather, the application (or void) of a relevant theory/concept that could guide the sub-questions, as well as different sub-research tasks, have determined the methodology to be used in each case: namely, that of quantitative or qualitative design.

More specifically, the ‘actor’ dimension of China’s official media narratives concerning Sino-Japanese relations was analyzed in a quantitative fashion because this analytical section was informed by the concepts and discourse of ‘geopolitical fear’ and ‘geoeconomic hope’ (Cowen & Smith, 2009; Sparke, 2007). The main task of this analytical chapter (Chapter 4) is to test the Chinese media’s representations of those two discourses when reporting on Japan and Sino-Japanese relations. By contrast, for the ‘connector’ dimension of public discussions about China’s social media, a qualitative approach was selected because the content analysis of digital debates around the issue of Sino-Japanese relations aimed to discover emergent patterns, and also to develop a new concept that could better capture the changing nature and specific characteristic of mass deliberation in the Chinese context (related findings see Chapter 5). As for the ‘interlocutor’ dimension (Chapter 6), the method of examining Sina’s verified users’ online practices involved a combination of quantitative analysis, which was used to code Sina users’ profiles, while a qualitative approach was adopted to code their posts. Svensson’s (2014) research has investigated the composition of Sina’s verified users by randomly selecting 300 verified users to determine their occupations and institutions, and this provided a guideline and reference for this study to quantitatively test the users’ profiles. In addition, to explore those verified users’ discourses when discussing Sino-Japanese relations, a qualitative method was used to discover the emergent narrative patterns that ‘digital influentials’ displayed during the ‘re-mediation’ process in China’s political communication space.

This thesis adopted a human coding approach, and coders were the author of this thesis another trained coder—a native Chinese graduate student who majors in media and communication. During the coding process, the data analysis software MAXQDA was adopted to assist data coding and storage. Intercoder reliability was assessed at two points

during content analysis process: pilot and final. The pilot reliability check was conducted after initial coder training and before the study began. The final reliability assessment was done on a second, randomly selected subsample (10% of the total sample) during the full data collection to fairly represent the coders' performance throughout the study. The widely used reliability coefficients of percent agreement (or crude agreement) and Cohen's *kappa* were applied with the help of the computer program *Com kappa3*.

The coding forms/ data collection sheets are as follows.

Appendix 1 Coding form for content analysis of the *People's Daily's* coverage of Sino-Japanese relations

1. Title (heading):
2. Date:
3. Page/Section:
4. Length:
5. Topic:
 - a. Sino-Japanese War history and war-related issues:
 - b. Sino-Japanese territorial dispute and other geopolitical conflicts:
 - c. Sino-Japanese official cooperation:
 - d. Sino-Japanese people-to-people exchanges:
 - e. Japan's international engagements:
 - f. Japan's domestic politics and military affairs:
 - g. Japan's domestic society:
 - h. Japan's domestic economy:
6. Stance:
 - a. Positive
 - b. Negative
 - c. Neutral (including un-detected)
7. Geo-discourse of news coverage:
 - a. Geopolitical fear
 - b. Goeconomic hope

Appendix 2 Protocol (data collection sheet) for Sina Weibo non-verified users' posts on Sino-Japanese relations

1. Date:
2. Source:
 - a. Original post
 - b. Repost with original comments
 - c. Repost without original comments
3. Number of repost:
4. Number of comment:
5. Supplementary data
 - a. Including external hyperlink
 - b. Not including external hyperlink
6. Theme:
 - a. Sino-Japanese War history and war-related issues (e.g., Yasukuni Shrine, Comfort women issue; Nanjing massacre)
 - b. Sino-Japanese contemporary territorial dispute and other geopolitical conflicts
 - c. Japan's domestic political and economic issues
 - d. Japan's international engagement and its bilateral relations with countries other than China
 - e. Sino-Japanese governmental cooperation
 - f. Sino-Japanese people-to-people exchanges
 - g. Contemporary Japanese culture and society
 - h. The Chinese state's policy towards Japan
 - i. Subjectless, radical and indignant sentiments
7. The point of view:
 - a. Emotional, malcontented expressions
 - b. Rational, constructive perceptions
 - c. Positive energy transmissions
 - d. Self-interested viewpoints

Appendix 3 Protocol (data collection sheet) for Sina Weibo verified users' posts on Sino-Japanese relations

1. Date:
2. Source:
 - a. Original post
 - b. Repost
3. User's occupation:
 - a. Media agencies
 - b. Public intellectuals (scholars, writers, critics, and individual media workers)
 - c. Governmental bodies and officials
 - d. Commercial sectors
 - e. Cultural industry
 - f. Other
4. Number of repost:
5. Number of comment:
6. Supplementary data
 - a. Including external hyperlink
 - b. Not including external hyperlink
7. Theme:
 - a. Sino-Japanese War history and war-related issues
 - b. Sino-Japanese contemporary territorial dispute and other geopolitical conflicts
 - c. Japan's domestic political and economic issues
 - d. Japan's international engagement
 - e. Sino-Japanese governmental cooperation
 - f. Sino-Japanese people-to-people exchanges
 - g. Contemporary Japanese culture and society
 - h. The Chinese state's policy towards Japan



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