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RE-EXAMINING THE INDIRECT MYTH OF CHINESE RHETORIC ON SOCIAL MEDIA

by

YUNYE YU

Under the Direction of Baotong Gu, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

It has long been asserted that a major difference between Chinese rhetoric and Western rhetoric lies in the preference for rhetorical strategies. The Chinese are believed to prefer indirect approaches in communication whereas the Americans tend to be more direct. This perception has been widely discussed and accepted by scholars and practitioners of inter-cultural communication. However, as globalization and technology are bringing about substantial changes to our communication experience, it is necessary to reexamine the "indirect myth" of Chinese rhetoric in a contemporary context characterized by the ubiquitous use of social media.

In this dissertation, I strive to answer two major research questions about the use of rhetorical strategies on social media. The two questions are as follows:

1) *Generally speaking, does a preference for directness or indirectness exist in Weibo postings? If not, are the two strategies equally prevalent on Weibo?*
2) *What direct strategies are most preferred by Chinese Weibo users?*

I employ a content analysis based on quantitative data and rhetorical analysis. I collected 25,316 pieces of authentic Weibo postings and had coders categorize the postings according to a coding scheme of nine rhetorical strategies with each strategy divided into directness and indirectness.

The research findings show that Weibo users have an overall preference for directness although users with academic backgrounds tend to use indirect strategies more often. "To argue or to comment" is the most frequently used rhetorical strategy, and direct comment or argument with opinion proceeding evidence is the most used direct strategy. I argue that the anonymity and word limit are two major factors affecting users' preferences for direct rhetorical strategies. I also argue that the low level of user participation indicated by the overly simplistic and lopsided preference of directness mean that Weibo is primarily disseminating information but has not fully evolved to a public sphere.

INDEX WORDS: Directness, Indirectness, Rhetorical strategy, Chinese rhetoric, Content analysis, Social media

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by

YUNYE YU

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2018

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2018

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YUNYE YU

Committee Chair: Baotong Gu

Committee: George Pullman

Elizabeth Lopez

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

May 2018

DEDICATION

In dedication to my parents.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The myth of Chinese "indirection"

It is almost a commonplace in comparative rhetoric to assert that the significant difference between Chinese rhetoric and Western rhetoric is that the former prefers indirect strategies while the latter prefers a direct approach in communication. From scholarly work to government reports, Americans tend to believe that indirectness marks a distinctive feature of Chinese communication style.

Richard Solomon, a scholar of Chinese studies and the former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs from 1989 to 1992, gives his account on the very indirect, sometimes cryptic Chinese negotiation style based on his experience. He notices that the Chinese officials also "express differences by indirection and subtly of languages to minimize confrontations." (Solomon, 1983) He wrote in his CIA-commissioned communication handbook for the U.S. leaders that "a fundamental characteristic of Chinese negotiation style is the effort to …[cultivate] a sense of friendship" because friendship implies "the obligation to provide support and assistance to one's 'friends'," an emotion that can be manipulated to generate "obligation, guilt, or dependence." In the period of assessment, which is often "lengthy and diffuse," the Chinese officials usually resist exposing their position too early, waiting until the counterpart's stand is fully known. As Solomon observes, the Chinese also highly value patience as a virtue, whereas the American style of problem-solving is very likely to be interpreted as impatience, resulting thus in misunderstandings between two parties. Besides enormous patience and emphasis on maintaining harmony in communication, Solomon also reminds his colleagues that the Chinese are masters in the use of political symbolism, such as the "ping-pong diplomacy" and giant pandas.

Solomon also notices that the Chinese are very good at making the most use of the environment and context to stage the negotiation. For example, in the stage of facilitating maneuvers, the Chinese prefer to hold the negotiation on their own territory, so they can facilitate the procedures to maximize their control over a favorable context, aspects including banquet, toasts, the quality of cuisine, and the sightseeing excursions.

Not only have government officials like Solomon been reflecting on Chinese indirectness, but also scholars of comparative rhetoric and communication studies have long been discussing Chinese people's preference for stability and harmony at the potential expense of clarity in communication (Hall, 1976; Kennedy, 1998; Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010; Mao 2006).

1.2 The influence of technology on communication

In the context of globalization and digital revolution, the emergence of new media has brought substantial changes to communication. Computers and social media are exerting greater impact on our literacy and social life, such as the way we read and write, the channels through which we obtain information, the available means to present and promote personal opinions, and the preference of communication modes.

As a result of technology development, individuals in China have gained better access to information and new channels to convey messages. Whether or not new technologies, such as the computer and online social media, have brought changes to Chinese communication and rhetoric remains an interesting research topic. One perspective to look at this issue is to compare Chinese rhetoric with Western rhetoric. In the field of comparative rhetoric, previous studies suggest that a notable disparity between Eastern and Western rhetoric is the preferences for different rhetorical strategies. Westerners use more direct expressions while indirect expressions are more common in the East. Although both modes can be found in Western and Eastern cultures, the

indirect mode is pervasive and "often deliberate" (Yum, 1988, p.385) in East Asia. However, the notion of directness and indirectness in Eastern and Western rhetoric is constructed on the basis of traditional rhetoric, especially written texts and written communication. While in the case of social media, its digital form has created writing experiences that are completely different from the traditional technologies. Moreover, social media was invented in the West, and its design is based on philosophy of openness and free speech, fundamentally Western ideologies. Western ideologies. Being introduced to China and developing into many local adaptations, social media is changing Chinese communication in various ways. As a Weibo user myself, I constantly feel the divergence of rhetorical patterns demonstrated on social media and cannot help thinking about the influence social media has brought to Chinese rhetoric, especially daily communication.

1.3 The peculiarity of the Chinese cyberspace and online rhetoric

What's making the question of online communication in China more interesting is *cyber sovereignty*, a doctrine featured by isolation of the Chinese cyberspace from the rest of the world as a result of the *Great Firewall* and severe censorship of online speech. I would like to call Chinese cyberspace with a term borrowed from evolutionary biology: *island ecology*, because both the Chinese cyber space and island ecology share characteristics like insularity and speciation of its own.

The isolation of the cyberspace in China starts from the blocking of a few foreign websites. The Chinese government employs *the Great Firewall* to bar some of the most popular Web sites—including Google, YouTube, Facebook, and Wikipedia—in fear of dominating local competitors or amplifying dissent. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other popular US-based social media services are cut off from the Chinese internet, accessible only by the virtual private

network (VPN) software that a small number of dedicated netizens (and expats) use to "scale the wall". Meanwhile, the leading Chinese microblog service, Sina Weibo, has attracted around 392 million monthly active users as of December 2017 (Chinanews.com).

Chinese cyberspace is a "cacophony of voices" (Herold and Marolt, 2011), many of which are critical or resentful to the suffrage at the hands of the rich and powerful, or corrupt officials, or other gripes caused by dramatic socio-economic changes (Yang, 2009). The critical expression often comes at a cost. Many Chinese users have experienced "deletion of post" because of the mentioning of sensitive political topics or criticism of the government. The online censorship is not only imposed on ordinary users, but also on academic publishing. In August 2017, a dispute over academic articles that mentioned sensitive topics such as the crackdown at Tiananmen Square, arose between foreign academic publishers and the Chinese authority. As a result, Cambridge University press had to remove more than 300 articles from one of its Chinese websites, in an effort to satisfy China's censors. Another academic publisher Springer Nature defended its decision to censor itself, saying that it was necessary "to prevent a much greater impact on our customers and authors." The government's censorship and the academic presses' self-censorship trigger uproar among scholars and researchers who are strongly upholding the principles of academic integrity and free speech.

The dispute is a mirror of the status quo of Chinese cyberspace. While publishers and users do have the resources to publish or post content, their rights are restrained: access to information and foreign websites are constantly interrupted or even blocked, interaction with the internet world outside the *Great Firewall* is cut-off, and users have to explore all kinds of methods to avoid censorship. As a result of the *cyber sovereignty*, the Chinese cyberspace has developed into a place like the Galapagos Islands in the Pacific Ocean: isolated, and it can only maintain

limited interaction with the outside world, yet it still has its own "diversity and speciation" (Wallace, 1902). Thanks to the enormous size of its netizen population[1] and a highly active, innovative Internet industry, the island ecology of Chinese Internet bears its own ability to develop or even flourish within its territory, allowing occasional interaction with the vast continent.

1.4 How I approach the indirection myth in the peculiar cyberspace context

Robert Oliver (1971, pp.2-3) tells us that "the key to understanding the Asian mind and Asian civilization is their *manner of talk: how they addressed one another, and why, under what circumstances, on what topics, in what varied styles, with what intent, and with what effects.*" Echoing Oliver's proposition, I aim to examine the "indirection myth" of Chinese rhetoric in the contemporary context featuring an island-ecology-like cyberspace. The central research questions are as follows:

1) *Generally speaking, does a preference for directness or indirectness exist in Weibo postings? If not, are the two strategies equally prevalent on Weibo?*
2) *What direct strategies are most preferred by Chinese Weibo users?*

I collected authentic data from Weibo communication, had coders to code Weibo postings, and analyzed the use of rhetorical strategies on this social media platform. Chapter 2 reviews the literature covering the current discussion of direct and indirect rhetorical strategies. I articulate the problem of rhetorical strategies from four perspectives: classical rhetorical theories, Hall's high- and low- context theory, Hofstede's cultural dimension theory, and speech act theory. I synthesize nine rhetorical strategies that can be employed either in a direct way or in an indirect

[1] According to *China Internet Watch*, China has over 751 million internet users as of July 2017, making it the world's largest. The number of mobile internet users has reached 724 millions in June 2017, which accounted for 96% of internet users (non-exclusive).

approach. Chapter 3 provides a detailed explanation of the methodology. As a content analysis on Weibo data will be conducted in this dissertation, I first give operationalized definitions to nine strategies and exemplify both direct and indirect approach in each strategy with selected Weibo postings. I also explain selection criteria for Weibo postings and provide detailed accounts of the coding process, including credentials of coders, coding scheme, and inter-coder reliability. Chapter 4 is the analysis of coded Weibo data. I first provide the general results of the data, such as the frequency of each strategy and directness. Then I provide a strategy-by-strategy analysis to investigate which strategy is used more and whether or not directness is preferred compared to indirectness. In addition, a case-by-case analysis provides insights into factors that affect the use of rhetorical strategies, such as users' background, topics and themes, and connections with broad social contexts. Last but not least, a third analysis is conducted to investigate how users' rhetorical choices change over time, aiming at adding a longitudinal perspective to the research findings. Chapter 5 discusses how to interpret the research results. I propose to rethink the indirection myth in Chinese rhetoric and argue that anonymity and word limit have profound influence on users' preference of rhetorical strategies while many other factors are also influential. Chapter 6 is the conclusion part calling for a new paradigm to study Chinese rhetoric with an emic approach.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews existing scholarship regarding the key concepts and theories. The notion of directness as a means of rhetorical strategy will be explored within several different but interrelated frameworks, including classical rhetoric theory, comparative rhetoric, contrastive rhetoric, applied linguistics, i.e. speech act theory, and cross-cultural rhetoric such as contexting theory and cultural dimension theory.

In this part, I will synthesize and reflect on scholarship that has explored rhetorical strategies and social media. Rhetorical strategy is an ancient concept with varying terminologies. This part will cover theories and research in multiple fields including classic rhetoric, comparative rhetoric, technical communication, inter-cultural communication, pragmatics in applied linguistics, contrastive rhetoric, and classical Chinese literature and rhetoric. Social media, as a product of the Internet, has revolutionized our communication and inspired enormous studies researching topics such as social movement, marketing, crisis management, and communication. However, the topic of rhetorical strategies on social media is relatively under explored.

Rhetoric is not simply a way of persuasion; it is also a dynamic process of information exchange that is beyond mere verbal expression. The concepts of directness/indirectness should be articulated from multiple perspectives with a broader scope of intellectual discussion that further includes linguistics, cognition science, and literary studies.

2.1 Regarding rhetorical strategies

Rhetorical strategy, or sometimes called rhetorical device, does not have a very clear definition. In this study, I will use the term "rhetorical strategy" to refer to any strategy, method, tactic, means, effort, or action that is able to produce persuasion.

The invention of the idea "rhetorical strategies" can be traced back to the ancient Greek philosophy and rhetoric. In the system of classical Western rhetoric, three forms of persuasive appeals are thoroughly discussed as rhetorical strategies: *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*. Aristotle addresses these three appeals in his *On Rhetorics* (Aristotle, trans. 2007), positing that they can fit the speech to the souls of the listeners. According to Aristotle (trans. 2007), *logos* is the

logical argument using either inductive or deductive reasoning; *pathos* is the considerations or means to lead audience to feel emotion; *ethos* refers to the speaker's character, i.e, whether the audience finds the author trustworthy. In Aristotelian rhetorical theories, *logos* is regarded as the utmost important of the three because rationality is the most universal human mental trait and logical argument is presumably to "have the widest currency." (Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001, p.4). Classical rhetoric offers several means of generating *logos*, such as adopting common topics (*topoi*) and using enthymemes (Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001, p.4). Deduction and induction are the two major reasoning methods. Classical rhetoric defines deductive reasoning as the use of rhetorical syllogism (Kennedy,1994, p.58) and defines inductive reasoning as a form of argument that draws conclusion from "certain undisputed facts." (Cicero, trans. 1949, p. 31)

As for *pathos*, Aristotle suggests various methods to arouse emotions in an audience (Aristotle, trans. 2007). For example, one way to make the audience angry is to let them be aware that they are being laughed at or mocked at. As for *ethos*, the orator's goal is not only to make the speech demonstrative, but also to make his own character "look right" (Aristotle, trnas. 2007, p.112). Aristotle's ideal character of speaker with moral authority is "old, wise, and of a noble family" (Aristotle, trans. 2007, pp.149-156), but in contemporary rhetorical contexts, an orator needs to establish a proper *ethos* by correctively reflecting the audience's attitudes, desires, values and belief (Pullman, 2013).

Rhetorical strategies are also closely related to style. The *AP Rhetorical Devices List* lines up 240 strategies that can be used in writing and speaking, such as analogy, deductive reasoning, emotional appeals, humor, and irony.

2.2 Current scholarship regarding directness and indirectness

Previous studies and scholarship have explored the topic of directness versus indirectness (sometimes referred as "direction" and "indirection") from multiple angles in several different but related areas including classical rhetoric, comparative rhetoric, technical communication, inter-cultural communication, pragmatics in applied linguistics, contrastive rhetoric, and classical Chinese literature and rhetoric. These studies generate insightful vision of Chinese communication by comparing it to American or Western communication.

Ma (1996), reflecting on this topic from the perspective of communication style, synthesizes the features of the Eastern *indirectness* as "underplaying all matter of the heart"(Hsu 1953, p.10), being "non-assertive" and "non-argumentative" (Oliver, 1971, p. 12), releasing very limited information via "coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message" (Hall, 1976, p.79), always adopting a "non-confrontational" attitude toward conflicts (Ting-Toomey, 1982, p. 81), "performing two types of illocutionary act at the same time" (Okabe 1987, p.132), having a tendency to avoid face negotiation (Ting-Toomey, 1988), and helps to prevent "the embarrassment of rejection by the other person or disagreement among partners" (Yum, 1988, p.377). He further suggests that based on scholars' research, *directness* can be characterized as "displaying strong emotionality" (Hsu, 1953, p.10), "vesting the mass of the information in the explicit code" (Hall, 1976), employing "confrontational" styles in conflict management (Ting-Toomey, 1982, p.164).

Indirectness, as a style of communication and a particular type of rhetorical strategy, is pervasive in traditional Chinese communication. Not only have China observers, from early missionaries in the 18th and 19th century to popular business etiquette books like *Passport China*, but also scholars in the fields like business and technical communication, cognitive psychology,

and cultural studies, have noticed it and consistently compared it with the direct style of Western rhetoric and Western cultures, arguing that indirectness, as a unique feature of Chinese rhetoric, could be associated with the influence of Confucius teaching that emphasizes hierarchy (Chen & Chung, 1994; Yum, 1988), the Taoist philosophies (Chan, 1963; Fang & Faure, 2011), Buddhism ideology of perception, and Chinese people's preference for stability and harmony (Hall, 1976; Kennedy, 1998; Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010, pp. 66-67).

In addition to the scholarship that explores the directness and indirectness phenomenon within the framework of Chinese cultural context, scholars also make endeavor in areas like comparative rhetoric and inter-cultural communication. The most recognized frameworks for exploring directness and indirectness are Robert Kaplan's thought pattern theory, Edward Hall's contexting theory, Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensional theory, and speech act theory. These theories provide practical insights into the research topic.

2.3 Thought pattern theory

In his article *Cultural Thought Patters in Inter-Cultural Education,* Kaplan (1966) suggests that writers of different cultures choose different paragraph structures, which to some extent reflect dissimilarities of rhetorical approaches and thinking patterns. His observation reveals that English writers prefer a linear structure and oriental students, such as those from China, tend to use a circular structure.

Kaplan's work suggests a sequence of causal relations among culture, language, thought and rhetoric. Matsuda (2001) illustrates Kaplan's paradigm as follows (p. 258):

Cultural patterns –language–thought (logic) –rhetoric

Kaplan believes that the English language and English speakers' thought pattern originated from the Anglo-European cultural pattern with an essential "Platonic- Aristotelian

sequence" of thought (Kaplan, 1966, p.12). This sequence is a cultural heritage of the philosophers of ancient Greece, and is subsequently developed by Roman, Medieval European, and modern and contemporary Western thinkers and rhetoricians.

From a linguistic and rhetorical perspective, the cultural thought model proposes reliable answers to the question of why non-native speakers' writing "[is] often subtly out of sync with what one might expect from a 'native' perspective" (Atkinson, 2000, p. 318), and it also has a profound impact on a large body of writing research and practice. For example, in a handbook for editors, Rew (1999) reminds editors of the different writing styles from a similar perspective: the rhetorical strategies English writers generally use follow a linear pattern, whereas writers with an Asian cultural background use an indirect approach with the key point at the end; Semitic cultures often use parallel coordinate clauses and repetition, Latin cultures use appeal to emotions and persuasion through expression of feelings, and Russian writers use digression and extraneous material.

Scholars also discuss directness and indirectness under the scope of intercultural communication. Mackiewicz and Riley (2003) discuss technical editors' use of direct and indirect strategies while communicating with technical writers. They argue that in a situation where the editor has not built up a close relationship with the writer, the editor will need to balance between a directive approach that might pose potential threat to "face" (Goffman, 1959) and self-image and a more indirect approach that sacrifices clarity.

However, empirical researches have provided substantial evidence against Kaplan's oversimplification of rhetorical structures and cultures (Hirose, 2003; Hyland & Milton, 1997; Mohan & Lo, 1985; Monroy-Casas, 2008; Yang & Cahill, 2008). For example, Mohan and Lo (1985) study L2 Hong Kong Chinese writers' English writing and discover that Chinese writers

do not follow the circular organizational structure when they write in English; on the contrary, their compositions show greater indirectness compared to their native English counterparts who are expected to write directly following the linear structure. This contradictory finding to Kaplan's theory may reflect participants' insufficient organizational skills in producing English texts.

Kaplan's description of Chinese L2 writers' patterns of thought as circular does not indicate that Chinese writing lack logic. On the contrary, Chinese rhetoric has a tradition of valuing logical reasoning. As Confucius recorded, Viscount of Ke once said to King Chou that "the virtue of speech is accordance with reason" (Confucius, trans. 1960). Connor argues that Kaplan's cultural thought pattern model builds up the foundation for contrastive rhetoric (Connor, 1996). Scholarship in this field so far has mainly focused on analyzing the structures of L2 texts written by different L1 writers. Students' writing texts and business communication documents constitute the majority of research materials (Connor, 2004). Being relatively easier to access, college students have become a favorable body of data resource for writing studies; however, the inauthenticity of their writing products is a major drawback of many studies, not to mention the reliability issue caused by their unstable writing competence.

2.4 Contexting theory

Edward Hall's contexting theory also investigates directness and indirectness. In his book *Beyond Culture*, Hall suggests that individuals will place information in a specific context to generate meaning (Hall, 1976, pp. 85-91). He proposes a contexting model by distinguishing two types of contexts: high context and low context (Hall, 1976). High context (HC) is defined as the one in which the comprehension of the information/message is "either in the physical context or internalized in the person" and very little is "in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the

message." (Hall, 1976, p.91) Low-context (LC) is the one in which "the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code" (Hall, 1976, p. 91). He also classifies several cultures on a scale in order of highest to lowest context: Japanese, Chinese, Arabs, Latin American, Italian, English, French, Northern Americans, Scandinavians, Germans, and Swiss- Germans (Hall, 1976; Hall & Hall, 1987). This model implies that eastern cultures such as Chinese and Japanese cultures are generally more inclined to indirectness and Western cultures such as Anglo and German cultures favor directness.

Major criticism of this model is on the validity of this ranking scale. Hall does not provide detailed description of the analysis he employed to construct this contexting model, nor does he explain how he developed the ranking of these different cultures (Cardon, 2008). An extensive set of qualitative studies, covering both theoretical and empirical aspects, have been subsequently conducted to explore the varied communication patterns in business and technical communication settings. Some researches validate Hall's theory (Thatcher, 1999; Ding, 2004; Wang, 2000; Khol et al., 1993; Sun, 2006), and some researches show contradictory findings (Beamer, 2003, Conaway & Wardrop, 2004; Connor et al., 1997; Thomas, 1998), indicating that Hall's classification of countries and cultures are limited especially when applied to authentic situations due to the complexity of factors that are impacting human communication.

2.5 Cultural dimension theory

The third theory that explores directness and indirectness in communication is Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory. His conceptualization of cultural variation across nations is originally generated from a factor analysis of 116,000 corporate employees' values of workplace from over 70 national subsidiaries (Hofstede, 1984). Hofstede's research proposes five dimensions: power distance, individualism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, and

short/long term orientation. Cardon (2008)'s research reveals that Hofstede's cultural dimensional theory is one of the dominant theoretical frameworks for interpreting inter-cultural communication.

Hofstede's cultural dimension model does not precisely describe any rhetorical strategies regarding directness or indirectness. His investigation of human behavior is conducted from a more socio-psychology-based perspective. However, cultural dimension model can provide a valid and reliable theoretical framework for in-depth analysis and interpretation of human communication.

2.6 Speech act theory

Pragmatics, a branch of applied linguistics, also contributes insight to this topic. A considerable amount of research in this area analyzes the directness and indirectness in human discourses applying speech act theory. Linguists propose the concept of "illocutionary act" to refer to the utterance that attempts to achieve the speaker's goal by multiple means such as driving, forcing, and motivating the listeners (Austin, 1975; Cohen, 1964; Searle, 1969). Searle (1969) introduces the concept of "indirect speech act" and defines it as a series of acts "[that a] speaker communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on their mutually shared background information, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, together with the general powers of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer." Searle (1969) also suggests that listeners derive meaning out of indirect speech acts by means of "cooperative process" and mutually shared background information, rationality and conventions.

Request, as a specific type of speech act, has been carefully examined by many researchers. According to a large-scale corpus study (Blum-Kulka et al. 1985), nine requestive strategies are identified and rank-ordered by decreasing degree of directness:

#1. Mood derivable. (Clean up the table!)

#2. Performative. (I request you to clean up the table.)

#3. Hedged performative. (I would like to ask you to clean up the table.)

#4. Locution derivable. (You should clean up the table.)

#5. Want statement. (I want you to clean up the table.)

#6. Suggestory formula. (How about cleaning up the table?)

#7. Query preparatory. (Could you clean up the table?)

#8. Strong hint. (The table is in a mess.)

#9. Mild hint. (When was the last time you cleaned up the table?)

The categorization and rank orders might need further adjustment, but it is indeed a meaningful effort to distinguish between directness and indirectness. Inspired by this chart, Zhang (1995)'s paper made an attempt to categorize requestive strategies among Chinese native speakers while speaking Chinese. According to Zhang's research, Chinese speakers' requestive strategies could be categorized into "direct," "conventionally indirect," and "indirect." The category of directness is featured by request strategies like "mood derivable," "explicit performative," "hedged performative," "locution derivable" and "want statement." The categories of "conventionally indirect" and "indirect" include strategies like "suggestory formula," "query preparatory," "strong hint," "mild hint," "downtoner," and "politeness marker." For example, the "explicit performative" refers to the illocutionary intent that is being explicitly named by the speaker using a relevant verb. The "hedged performative" speech acts are the ones that denote the request using a modal verb. Here are two examples (Zhang *The strategies in Chinese requesting*):

Explicit performative:

请把车开走。 *Drive the car away, please.*

Hedged performative:

我想请你做报告，行吗？I would like to invite you to do a presentation, is it OK?

In addition to categorization, linguists also note that directness and politeness are closely related. Generally speaking, the more directly a request is phrased, the less polite it is (Searle, 1969; Brown & Levinson, 1987). Factors that may influence the interaction between directness and politeness in a request utterance include "power and familiarity between interactants, the degree of imposition in a given request" (Brown & Levinson, 1987), "personal factors such as age and gender (Fraser, Rintell, & Walters, 1980), directive goals, the requester's right ad estimated difficulty to request, the requester's obligation to carry out the request, and the likelihood of compliance" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1985). However, Zhang (1995b) suggests that the factor of politeness should not override the distinction between directness and indirectness; information sequencing, as Zhang (1995b) points out, also associates with indirectness. If A prefaces his/her intention with any kind of "small talk or supportive move", it could be seen as indirectness as well. In *Indirectness in Chinese requesting,* Zhang also emphasizes that the formulation and the internal structure of the utterance "do not constitute indirectness". As some studies reveal, the Chinese and other East Asian speakers generally "defer" the introduction of the central topic until they finish a few small talk first (Scollon & Wong-Scollon, 1991; Young, 1982). Faerch and Kasper (1989) find out that the Chinese participants follow an "inductive" pattern while making a request: supportive moves + request + supportive move.

A speech act, for instance a request, contains the speaker's intention to persuade the audience to act, so a speech act could be seen as a special form of rhetoric. Therefore, by

reviewing current scholarship in the field of pragmatics, we can develop a better understanding of rhetorical strategies in regard to directness and indirectness in human discourse and behavior. Moreover, the linguistic elements involved here provide a different perspective that may help comprehend the rational, credible, and affective appeals that contribute to the persuasiveness of an online post. In composition studies, Mackiewicz and Thompson (2014) study tutoring strategies in a Writing Center. They categorize "telling" as a direct but less polite strategy and "suggesting" as a less direct but more polite use of language.

2.7 Current scholarship regarding directness

Several direct/indirect strategies can be synthesized from the current theories and empirical inquires.

1) Deductive approach.

Usually, the deductive approach is considered a form of directness and the inductive approach a form of indirectness (Bovee & Thill, 1998). Bovee and Thill demonstrate two major organizational patterns: direct approach (deductive), which is characterized by putting the main idea first, followed by the evidence; indirect approach (inductive), which is characterized by putting the evidence first and the main idea later. Some researchers extend the scope of this binary by taking the position of topic sentence or key information into account (Jia, 2004; Khatib & Moradian, 2011).

2) Paragraph organization pattern

As Kaplan (1966) argues, the organizational pattern of paragraphs reflects the writers' thought pattern. He further identifies several thought patterns across different cultures. Kaplan's theory suggests that people with a Western cultural background adopt a linear structure and participants from oriental cultures use circular structure to develop their articles (11). Many researchers

equate the use of linear structure with directness and circular structure with indirectness (Hirose, 2003; Kubota 1998; Uysal, 2008; Hyland & Milton, 1997; Kobayashi, 1984; Reid 1992).

3) Naming strategy

This strategy is used to make comparison. In advertising, comparative strategies are very common. Different levels of comparative advertisements have been categorized into two groups: direct comparative method and indirect method. Direct method will name the competing brands and make comparisons, but indirect method uses phrase like "a leading brand" instead of making comparison by mentioning other brands directly (Shao et al, 2004; Meuhling et al., 1990; Donthu, 1992).

4) Request strategy

This strategy is discussed in Beamer (2003)'s paper that studies the indirectness in Chinese business correspondence. The categorization standard she uses is based on the position of the head act in request letters. If the head act appears in the initial sentence or paragraph, it is direct approach; if it appears after explanation or other paragraphs, it is indirect. Conaway and Wardrope (2004)'s study follows Beamer's method, which identifies direct/indirect approach through locating the sentence that contains the main purpose. Similarly, some linguists define deductive style in requesting as "topic precedes explanations" (Scollon & Wong-Scollon, 1991; Young, 1982).

5) Informing strategy

The directness of informing strategy can be identified by the position of the key information. If the writer provides the key information at the beginning, it is direct approach; if the writer chooses to delay the presentation of the key information to the middle part, it is

indirect approach. Another standard to identify is preciseness. Providing precise and explicit information is regarded as directness, and providing ambiguous information is indirectness (Gudykunst et al., 1996).

6) Criticizing strategy

As Alred (1997) suggests, when people need to give criticism, there are two possible strategies. One can begin with a compliment before telling what should be improved, and this is indirectness. Alternatively, one can choose to directly state the criticism without giving any positive reinforcement. This "no compliment" strategy can be regarded as directness. In low context culture, criticism is "more direct and recorded formally", whereas in high context culture criticism is "more subtle and verbal" (Czinkota and Ronkainen, 2013, p. 134).

7) Quoting Strategy

As Bakhtin (1981) notes, "the transmission and assessment of the speech of others, the discourse of another, is one of the most widespread and fundamental topics of human speech." (Bakhtin, trans. 1981, p.337) A number of scholars share the hypothesis that all human languages have devices representing the speech of others in the form of quotation and reporting (Haberland, Gudermann, Stavropoulou et al.). The Chinese language is no exception. Quotation and reporting can be classified in diverse forms depending on "the level of directness or 'faithfulness' of the information" (Rhee, 2016). A quote of the source verbatim is considered more direct and recasting the information is seen as indirect speech (Aikhenvald, 2004).

Kennedy (1998) suggests in his *Comparative Rhetoric* that classical Chinese texts avoid indirect discourse, and choose to directly quote the actual words of others. According to Kennedy, the use of actual words in a quotation could be associated with directness in rhetoric.

8) Dealing with a situation when one is pressed for opinion

Gudykunst et al. (1996) develop a scale of ten items to measure communication style in which one of the items could reflect the direct/indirect tendency. The item associated with directness and indirectness is as follows: “when pressed for an opinion, I respond with an ambiguous position. When pressed for an opinion, people can choose to be honest and speak out what they think, or they can keep silent in order to maintain harmony. Honesty in this case represents directness while maintaining harmony actually reflects indirect strategies (Warner-Søderholm, 2013).

9) Correcting strategy

In high context culture, people are closely tied to other members of the group with stronger social bonds (Kim et al, 1998), and they are more capable of integrating information. Therefore, there is “a set of rules governing what one should see or be blind to,” and “what one should do or should not do.” For example, in typical high context Asian cultures, one would seldom correct you or explain things to you voluntarily, especially for what you are supposed to know. Accordingly, we can consider the approach of avoiding correcting or explaining things to be indirectness and the approach of correcting, explaining, or sharing things openly to be directness.

2.8 Directness in Chinese rhetoric

A few scholars have noted the indirectness in Chinese rhetorics, but no specific argument has been made regarding directness. Kennedy argues that inductive approach is the chief logic in argument whereas deductive logic is “undeveloped” (“Comparative Rhetoric” 141-167). Mao echoes Hall’s theory by pointing out that indirectness in Chinese communication should not be linked to lack of information; on the contrary, the context of traditional Chinese communication always creates a surplus of meaning, or “productive vagueness” as Mao calls it (74). The author deliberatively uses contextualized cues to invite the audience to participate in the meaning-

making process that creates indirection in this process. Hall and Ames argue that the typical Chinese communication relies on this mode of meaning surplus to create "richly vague significance" (229).

Some linguists note that Chinese native speakers sometimes are astonishingly direct while making suggestions (Gabriele Kasper & Yanyin Zhang). The way Chinese speakers offer suggestion "almost sounds like a command." As many learners observe, the Chinese are also quite direct on certain topics such as age, salary and obesity, but indirect on other topics such as response to invitations, offering criticism, and talking about intimate relationships. The distinction of handling these topics are possibly caused by cultural differences as topics like age and obesity are not sensitive to talk about in a Chinese context.

2.9 Literature regarding social media and Weibo

Social media, as a product of the Internet, has revolutionized our communication and inspired a large number of studies exploring research topics such as social movement, marketing, crisis management, communication and so on. According to a meta-study of research domain regarding social media in dissertation research in the U.S., political issues and marketing are the two most frequently addressed study topics (Piotrowski 300), but this meta-study does not find a dissertation project specifically addressed the topic of rhetorical strategies.

Sina Weibo or Weibo is the most wildly used social media in China. According to Sina's IPO report, by the end of September 2015, Weibo has attracted over 222 million monthly active users. This number has increased to 392 million as of December 2017 (Chinanews.com). Censorship, which is related to the preference for indirectness, is one of the most researched topics (Ng, Fu et al, Mason). No specific research project on Weibo users' rhetorical strategies has been published so far.

2.10 Literature regarding social media and Weibo

Here I identify several research gaps based on my reading of the literature:

1) Currently, a large portion of empirical studies have looked at the tendency of using direct or indirect strategies. Researchers in the field of applied linguistics approach the topic of directness and indirectness from the perspective of speech act. However, in rhetoric studies, direct rhetorical strategy is still a vague concept that needs to be examined in a systematic way.

2) Published empirical studies have employed a variety of research methods to analyze rhetorical strategies. A considerable number of studies have provided us with in-depth insights through theoretical discussion and qualitative analysis. While these type of methods offers insightful linguistic, cultural, and rhetorical explanation for some of the strategies found in writing, the nature of qualitative methods limits our understanding because they cannot yield answers to questions like "do users adopt direct strategies more frequently than indirect strategies." Therefore, quantitative research could be a favorable supplement that can provide more empirically reliable research findings by implementing carefully designed and controlled research. For example, current studies have not answered the question of to what extent the Chinese speakers favor indirectness. By collecting real life data and running statistical analysis, this question could be answered with quantifiable research results.

3) A considerable number of research findings are generated from students' writing (Kaplan, Adair, Callow and Schiffman, Dozier et al, Gudykunst et al, Kapoor et al, Kim et al, Kitayama and Ishii, Knuston et al, Koeszegi et al, Leets, Manrai and Manrai, Oguri and Gudykunst, Taylor et al, Thomas). It is understandable to recruit college students because they are the most accessible and available group. However, the homogeneity of research objects causes reliability problem such as weak generalizability of research findings. In order to enhance

the reliability and validity, researchers can collect data from a wider range of people with different educational and social backgrounds to ensure that the research results could be generalized to some larger population.

4) Many of the published studies examine English texts written by Chinese learners (Beamer, Hyland, Ken, and Milton, John, Jia, Y, Mohan, Bernad, You, and Lo, Winnie A.-Y, Yang, Ling and Cahill, David), not Chinese participants' writing in their native language. Mohan and Lo argue that the preference of direct strategy can be interpreted as a reflection of insufficient organizational skills in producing English L2 texts.

5) Online Chinese communication style is an emerging research area. Fann and Faure encourage researchers to study the differences between online and offline Chinese communication (320-333).

As discussed earlier in this paper, Chinese social media users' rhetorical preference may reflect the change of communication style in China, which could add important insights into the fields of rhetoric study and communication. Unfortunately, this topic has not been well explored so far. I believe that the study of directness and indirectness on Weibo would make a meaningful contribution to several writing and communication-related fields.

3 OPERATIONALIZING RHETORICAL STRATEGIES: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

In this chapter, I propose an integrated approach that defines directness through multiple lenses and posits directness in various online contexts. I describe and explain the methodological approach, including the theoretical framework of rhetorical strategies and the mixed methods consisting of quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis. I will explain the data collection method in detail, including the development of coding scheme and the criteria for selecting

Weibo postings. I also briefly introduce the credentials of the coders, training procedures, and inter-coder reliability.

3.1 Theoretical framework: an integrated approach

My methodological approach consists of two aspects: (1) a content analysis of rhetorical strategies in user-generated Weibo postings and (2) an in-depth analysis of the socio-cultural contexts of Chinese social media.

This study is a descriptive content analysis, aiming to "infer characteristics to the source" (Neuendorf, 2016) Also, this study moves beyond general, ad hoc descriptions of online communication, hoping to provide more in-depth analysis of the context that is shaping online communication. Unlike many other empirical studies aiming to generalize its findings to the greater population, this study has no intention to make a claim about the rhetoric on Weibo or the rhetoric in contemporary China. On the contrary, this study emphasizes the analysis of context, both social and cultural, the relationship between contextual restraints and choices of rhetorical strategies, and to help practitioner, observer, media, and other agents draw useful information from the online communication

Before we start a study, we must operationally define the research objects. However, in the case of rhetorical strategy, it is hard to clearly define the research object because current scholarship in the fields of rhetoric and communication have not provided a precise definition. Generally speaking, the term "rhetorical strategy" is used to refer to any possible way that may produce persuasion. It could be a particular effort to organize evidence, a strategy to connect factors into a logical sequence, or a method to present a cluster of ideas in an appealing way.

I have discussed four lines of theories concerning the binaries of directness and indirectness: classical Western rhetorical theory, Hall's contexting theory, Hofstede's cultural

dimensions theory, and speech act theory. Nine direct/indirect strategies can be synthesized from current literature, including both theoretical discussion and empirical studies. I will define each strategy and elaborate on the rhetorical situation in which the strategy functions.

Given the time constraints and the large number of postings, pairing each of the 25,316 postings, meaning each posting has two raters, will expensive and labor intensive. Thus, I decided to have each posting coded once by one rater, but two measures are adopted to ensure the coding reliability. The first measure is monitoring coding quality through randomly assigned pre-selected postings to two raters and calculating the inter-rater reliability accordingly. I choose Cohen's *Kappa as* the inter-rater reliability index because *Kappa* is the most fit index to measure nominal data.

3.2 Directness in the situations: a detailed description of nine rhetorical strategies

In this section I will describe and exemplify nine categories of rhetorical strategies. For each strategy, I will briefly describe the rhetorical situation, and I will also provide a detailed description of how Weibo users employ the strategy in their postings.

Before I move to each strategy, I need to discuss the definition of rhetorical situation in this study because it will shape the understanding and categorization of rhetorical strategy. In an article that initiates the discussion of rhetorical situation in the 20th century, Bitzer (1968) proposes three constituents of a rhetorical situation: the *exigency*, the *audience*, and the c*onstraints*. According to Bitzer, the exigency can refer to "an imperfection marked by urgency" and "something waiting to be done" (p.6), and constraints are "persons, events, objects, and relations which…have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence." (p.8) While analyzing the rhetorical situation of Weibo postings, I take the three constraints into consideration and develop the coding scheme accordingly.

3.2.1 Strategy #1: Deductive approach

Strategy #1 applies to postings that are argumentative by nature. When users present their own opinions on another user's posts or argue for their opinions on Weibo, *logos* (logical appeal), which organizes an argument with a clear thesis and supporting evidences, could create prominent persuasiveness. Aristotle identifies two most notable structures of logic: deductive reasoning and inductive reasoning (40). Deductive reasoning, or syllogism as Aristotle calls it (33), makes a credible statement based on other statements that are so; inductive reasoning adopts an approach that is "from particulars to universal" (40). According to Aristotle, both reasoning methods have merits (40), but he does not associate them with directness or indirectness.

The perception that the deductive approach reflects directness notably prevails in technical and professional communication, especially in Business Communication textbooks where deductive approach is frequently called the direct approach and inductive approach is considered the indirect way of communication, for example, *Business communication today* by Bovee and Thill (1998), *Business Communication* by Cardon (2015), *Technical Communication* by Lannon and Gurak (2013), *Writing that works* by Oliu, Brusaw, and Alred (2016). Both Bovee and Thill (1998) and Cardon (2016) demonstrate two major organizational patterns: direct approach (deductive), which is characterized by putting the main idea first, followed by the evidence, and indirect approach (inductive), which is characterized by putting the evidence first and the main idea later. Some researchers extend the scope of this dichotomy by taking the position of topic sentence or key information into account (Jia, 2004; Khatib and Moradian 83), which characterizes directness as topic sentence/key information preceding the less important information.

In addition to the dichotomy between argument and evidence, a variation of direct strategy exists: users stating the arguments without giving supporting evidence (Yu, 2014). Similarly, the indirect approach would be providing evidence without clearly stating a claim or opinion.

3.2.2 Strategy #2: Paragraph organization pattern (linear or circular)

Strategy #2 applies to long posting with a word count over 120 characters. The idea of categorizing long postings comes from thought pattern theory (Kaplan, 1966). Kaplan's analysis of students' writing suggests that the organizational pattern of paragraphs reflects the writers' thought pattern (13). He identifies several thought patterns across different cultures and points out that people with a Western culture background adopt a linear structure, starting with a general topic sentence followed by a series of supporting sentences; on the other hand, participants from eastern cultures use circular or parallel structure to develop paragraphs (11). Many studies equate the use of linear structure with directness and circular or parallel structure with indirectness (Hirose, 2003; Kubota, 1998; Uysal, 2008; Hyland & Milton, 1997; Kobayashi, 1984; Reid 1992).

Kaplan's work focuses on students' writing in an academic context, which is not exactly the same case of communication on social media. One notable difference is the complexity of the text. Academic writing, even that of a students' work, is expected to be well developed in terms of structure and thoughts, and usually involves multiple paragraphs, whereas in the case of Weibo postings due to a word limit of 140 Chinese characters, users usually find it quite challenging to write a fully-fledged argument. However, the Chinese language can generate complex meaning within a small amount of words, so I keep this category in the coding scheme in the hope of capturing postings that can address this strategy with efficient use of words. In

short, the organization pattern can be applied to long postings that intend to express complex thoughts within a word limit. The threshold is 120 words.

3.2.3 Strategy #3: Naming strategy

Strategy #3 applies to Weibo postings that intend to make comparisons. While comparing two ideas or opinions, one can choose to directly name the adverse party, a move that can be regarded as directness as opposed to an indirect move that avoid mentioning the opponent's name. For example, in advertising comparative strategies are frequently used. Different levels of comparative advertisements can be categorized into two groups: the direct comparative method and the indirect method. Direct method will name the competing brands and make comparisons thereof, but indirect method uses referential phrases like "a leading brand" instead of specifically mentioning the names of other brands (Shao et al., 2004, Muehling, Stoltman, & Grossbart, 1990; Donthu, 1992).

While applying this strategy in an online environment, users usually introduce opinions from the opposite side as a way to defend their own stance. For example, Weibo user A wants to rebut a comment posted by another user B, so user A would tag user B and add argument in the same post. Thus, the action of tagging another user becomes an application of naming strategy by nature and the mention of opposition's name indicates directness in terms of rhetorical strategy.

3.2.4 Strategy #4: Requesting strategy

Strategy #4 applies to postings that are asking the readers or viewers to do something, such as requesting, suggesting a solution, calling attention, and calling for action. Since requesting is one of the most used strategies under this definition, we name this category *requesting strategy*. Requesting strategy is discussed in Beamer's paper (206), which studies

indirectness in Chinese business correspondence. The standard of categorization Beamer uses is based on the position of the head act in a request letter. According to Beamer's study, if the head act, such as requesting for information, appears in the initial sentence or paragraph, it could be counted as direct approach; if the head act appears after explanation or other paragraph, it is counted as indirectness. Conaway and Wardrope (2004)'s study follows Beamer's method of identifying direct/indirect approach through locating the sentence that contains the main purpose . When "topic precedes explanations," it is also treated as directness (Scollon & Wong-Scollon, 1991; Young, 1982).

Here I include a few scenarios in which requesting strategies are employed. When a user needs more information regarding the topic, he or she can request for information; When users are debating or discussing, one can ask questions as a way to solicit information or direct others to do something; When discussing a social issue, one can call for action or suggest a direction, both of which are requesting speech acts.

3.2.5 Strategy #5: Informing Strategy

Strategy #5 applies to a situation in which one intends to provide information to the conversation. Informing strategy is used when users need to inform other users. The directness of informing strategy can be identified through the position of the key information. If the user provides the key information at the beginning of the text, it could be regarded as a direct approach; if the writer delays the key information to the middle or later part, it could be seen as an indirect approach., In addition to the position of key information, a second criterion to identify direct informing strategy, as the study of Gudykunst et al. (1996) suggests, is the preciseness of the message. The authors suggest that providing precise and explicit information is regarded as

directness and that ambiguous information or understatement should be associated with indirectness.

On social media, users will encounter situations where they need to provide information to other users, either to support ones' argument or to introduce additional information to the conversation. For example, in the pilot study, one user cites external sources in his/her post to bring up more information regarding the topic in order to argue against different opinions.

3.2.6 Strategy #6: Criticizing Strategy

Strategy #6 applies to a rhetorical situation in which one expresses disapproval, disagreement, or other negative attitudes. Criticizing is a commonly used strategy that is especially favored by social media users while commenting on breaking news and controversial accident. In this study, the definition of criticizing can be extended to accusing, deploring, and cursing, some speech acts that "include the notion of reaction to other people's behavior… and of attitudes and expressions of attitudes to someone else's past conduct or imminent conduct" (Austin, 1962, p. 160). The speech act in this category must exhibit a clear object such as a person or certain behavior, and any trolling, random verbal assault, or swearing without a specific object of act will not count. As Alred (1997) suggests, two contrastive strategies of offering criticism are extensively used: beginning with a compliment before addressing what should be improved, or alternatively choosing to directly state the criticism without giving any positive reinforcement first. The former, characterized by compliment preceding real criticism, is regarded as indirect communication; the latter, in which criticism is put forward without any delay, is regarded as directness. In addition to the positions of criticism and compliment, the pilot study also finds a variation of this strategy: users solely stating the criticism without giving any form of compliment or euphemism.

3.2.7 Strategy #7: Quoting Strategy

Strategy #7 applies to the situation when one needs to quote someone else's words, either from another posting or from other sources. Kennedy discusses s quoting strategies in traditional Chinese texts. In *Comparative Rhetoric*, he points out that classical Chinese texts avoid "indirect discourse"; instead, writers prefer to directly quote the actual words of others (Kennedy, 1998, p. 142). Aikenvald (2004) proposes that a quote of the source verbatim should be considered more direct and recasting the information should be considered as indirect speech.

Quoting, similar to other writing strategies such as paraphrasing and summarizing, can be used to provide evidence, add credibility, or call attention to a particular point of view that the author wants to argue about (Driscoll & Brizee, 2013). Direct quotation of the actual words is regarded as directness, whereas indirect quotation, which brings in the meaning rather than the quote verbatim, could be regarded as indirectness.

For Weibo users, quoting external sources or words of other users mainly functions in two ways: to support one's own argument or to introduce a counter-argument. For example, Yu (2015)'s small-scale study discovers Weibo comments applying quoting strategies. One user says in his comments under the original post: "Sanji once said that [he] would never beat ladies no matter what happened." Sanji is the protagonist in a popular Japanese cartoon series *One Piece*. The quoting, which is an attempt to be funny in this particular context, is an indirect approach as it rephrases Sanji's idea. Unlike academic writing where quoting and citing are essential, in online communities like Weibo building up a strong ethos is not always the priority of users. The purposes of quoting vary across different topics and users. In some scenarios this strategy is used for the sake of humor, and the quotation, therefore, should be understood figuratively, rather than literally.

3.2.8 Strategy #8: Dealing with a situation when one is pressed for an opinion

Strategy #8 applies to situations in which one has to respond while being pressed for an opinion. This strategy is developed out of a scale to measure individuals' communication style (Gudykunst et al., 1996). One of the measurements that reflecting direct/indirect tendency is "when pressed for an opinion, I respond with an ambiguous position." Although Gudykunst et al. (1996)'s study focuses on real life communication, the strategy used to deal with pressed opinion is also commonly used in online settings too.

In a social setting that involves interpersonal communication, such as a workplace discussion or an online forum where arguments are going back and forth, individuals face two different ways to respond to pressed opinion: one can be honest and speak out what he or she thinks, or alternatively keep silent in order to maintain harmony. Honesty, in this case, represents directness, and the move to maintain harmony indicates indirectness (Warner-Søderholm, 2013). Unlike Gudykunst et al. (1996)'s study that relies on the self-report measures of attitude, the online commutation environment makes the measuring of attitude highly unfeasible as the authors of texts are usually inaccessible during the research. To overcome the vagueness caused by the absence of authors, this study applied text analysis techniques instead of self-report methods such as Likert scale. Coders will first read the context to decide if one user presses another user for opinion. Then, directness will be identified through a direct expression of opinions without using any euphemism, and indirectness can be identified as the use of euphemism without clearly stating an opinion or stance.

3.2.9 Strategy #9: Correcting strategy

Strategy #9 deals with a situation where one makes a mistake about an apparent fact. In high context culture, people are closely tied to other members of the group (Kim et al, 1998) and

are more capable of integrating information. Therefore, within a community a particular set of rules exist, which govern what one is supposed to know, to see, or to do. In high context cultures such as Chinese culture and Japanese culture, when someone makes a factual error, the listener or reader would seldom correct the speaker or voluntarily offer an explanation, especially for things that everyone involved in the communication are supposed to know. Accordingly, the approach that avoids correcting or explaining things could be taken as indirectness, and the approach that corrects, explains, or shares information openly could be categorized as directness. Similar to coding strategy #8, coders will also need to make judgements about the shared knowledge in the context before categorizing the strategy.

3.3 Coding scheme: identifying directness/indirectness in Weibo postings

This section will focus on the coding scheme I adopt for the study. Firstly, I will outline the categories with brief description. Secondly, I will provide sample postings for each category, which were selected from Weibo posts about a reckless driving incident; thirdly, I will discuss the challenges and revisions I have encountered during the coding process.

3.3.1 Determining the coding unit

In this study I used an individual comment posting on Weibo as one unit of coding/analysis. The rationale for doing so is because one single posting is the smallest unit a user can convey the message. Put in another way, regardless of the form and length of the content, once a user hits the “comment” button, the message will be automatically transformed into one single posting. Thus, I consider each individual posting as the unit of coding/analysis. I also need to note that in addition to posting comments, Weibo also employs a “reply” function, a design that may facilitate interactive dialogue involving multiple users. Coders are asked to read

the context of the dialogue and categorize each posting in the dialogue. In other words, one single posting remains the coding unit in the case of multiple postings.

Here I also define a few terms that will be mentioned and discussed in this dissertation. Posts, or original posts, refer to what the authors publish on Weibo. Postings refer to pieces published by users as a means to respond to the original posts. Comments in this study will be used interchangeably with postings, which refer to responses to the authors' original post.

3.3.2 The coding scheme

Table 3.1 Directness in rhetorical strategies

	Rhetorical Situation	Direct Strategy	Description
1	To comment or to argue	Deductive approach	The main idea preceding the supporting evidence OR A statement of argument/primary message without any supporting evidence.
2	To comment (with 120 words or more)	Linear organization	Linear structure (starting with a general topic sentence and developed with a series of supporting sentences)
3	To compare (usually to introduce an opposing idea as a way to defend one's own stance)	Naming the opposition party	The opposition party being named directly to make comparison
4	To make a request	Request first	The statement of request precedes the hedge or a statement of request without any hedging
5	To inform (especially bad news)	Key information first	Key information is placed at the beginning OR key information is precise and explicit
6	To criticize	Direct statement of criticism	The criticism precedes compliment or euphemistic expression OR criticism without any compliment
7	To quote	Direct quotation	Quote the actual words
8	To deal with pressed opinion	Speak out directly	Be honest and take position without using euphemism
9	To deal with people who don't know things that they are supposed to know	To correct or explain directly	Correcting the factual information or Explaining the information directly to the person
10	Miscellaneous	Postings that contain nothing but emoji, interjection, or other semantically unclear expression (i.e. "hehe," and "excuse me")	

3.3.3 An example

In this section I will illustrate the coding scheme with authentic Weibo postings as examples. All the postings are comments on a Weibo post about an incident in Chengdu, Sichuan Province. In the original post by SINA News, the official account of SINA News Department,

the text (See Figure 3.1) said that a female driver was dragged out of her car and beaten by the male driver who drove behind her. The male driver claimed that the female driver's reckless driving– switching lane without any signal–almost caused a collision, and his children were awfully frightened. The original post contains a link to a full-length news report on this incident, as well as six screenshots from a video recorded by a witness, in which the footage shows a man is beating a woman on the road. Although it is not clear which news channel reported this incident first, the one on SINA News is widely circulated and discussed. It receives over 10,000 comments in 24 hours.

Here I use this "reckless driving and female driver" to illustrate the coding scheme All the example listed in Table 2 are collected from comment postings under the original post. All the postings are posted in Chinese, so I provide a literal translation version. A dichotomy is made between directness and indirectness of each strategies to showcase the contrastive approaches in each rhetorical situation. This dichotomy is highly context-related and the degree of directness/indirectness across the strategies are not comparable. For instance, the example of directness in Strategy #1 does not contain the same degree of directness as the one in Strategy #3 shows.

Figure 3.1 Screenshot of Weibo Post Reckless Driving

Table 3.2 Directness in rhetorical strategies

Codes	Rhetorical Situation	Rhetorical Strategy	Examples (postings)	Description
1	To comment or to argue	Directness: Deductive approach	Posting: 我怀疑这个保护孩子老婆的男人有暴力倾向。在家可能有家暴的行为。敢这样肆无忌惮打陌生女人。肯定在家脾气也好不到哪去。 Literal translation: I suspect this guy who claimed he did this	The main idea precedes the evidence OR A statement of argument without any supporting evidence

			to protect his wife and children must have violent tendencies. [He] very likely commits domestic violence at home. If he could beat a female stranger like this, he can't be good tempered at home.	
-1		Indirectness: Inductive approach	Posting: 无论如何你代表不了法律，打成这样要负刑事责任的。 Literal translation: No matter what you do not represent the law, so you need to take liability for this crime.	Evidence precedes argument or main idea OR Presenting facts/evidence without a statement of argument
2	To comment (with 120 words or more)	Directness: Linear organization	Posting: 医学界把"路怒症"归类为阵发型暴怒障碍，指多重的怒火爆发出来，猛烈程度叫人大感意外。路怒症发作的人经常会口出威胁、动粗甚至毁损他人财物，也就是攻击性驾驶。研究表明，相当多的司机都有这些症状，但并非每个那么做的人都明白自己这是一个病态。 Literal translation: In the medical field, "road rage" should be categorized as Intermittent Explosive Disorder, which refers to an outbreak of rage with a shocking effect. People who have road rage frequently verbally threatened or physically manhandled others, and vandalize others' property, which is also called aggressive driving. Studies show that a large portion of drivers have symptoms of road rage, but not everyone with road rage would recognize this condition in themselves.	Linear structure (starting with a general statement of the content and developed with a series of supporting sentences)
-2		Indirectness: Non-linear paragraph organization	Posting: 任何事情不是说都会头脑发热就会不计后果的去做，男的车里面有老婆孩子，女的头两次别人家，男的骂两句都就算了，后面这个女的又去别以至于最后骂人是几个意思，总是说这男人打女人，但是要去想一下为什么打？还有等大家都成家了有了自己的老婆孩子如果遇到这种事情，大家又会是什么态度？	Non-linear structure, such as circular or parallel structure

			Literal translation: You cannot be hot-headed and reckless. This guy had his wife and baby on board. When the woman driver changes lane for the first two times, the guy just railed. Later the woman tried to squeeze him out again and swore. What did that mean! People always criticize men for beating women, but you need to think about why men beat women. Moreover, when everyone gets married, has your family, what would you think when you encounter this situation?	
3	To compare (usually to introduce opposing idea as a way to defend one's own stance)	Directness: Name the opposition	Posting: 没开过车吧同学，不出事还好，出了事就是男主一家子的性命了。法律向着弱者才让这女的钻了空子，这女的实在是该打 Literal translation: Buddy, you never drive, do you? If anything bad happened in this incident, it will cost the lives of the guy's family. The law is always on the side of the weak so they always took advantage of that. This woman deserves a good beat!	The opposition is named directly to make comparison
-3		Indirectness: Avoid naming any opposition	Posting: 看完行车记录仪在来评论 别上来就喷男司机如何如何 第一次便道 不是男司机紧急撒车 现在躺在医院里可能就是男司机一家三口了 人家还有小孩子 第一次也就算了 女司机又先后两次超车别车 还辱骂男司机 不揍她揍谁 你差点害死我 我都让过去了 还蹬鼻子赏脸 另外打人是不对 Literal translation: Watch the EDR video before bullying here. Don't come here and right away scold the male driver. When the first change of lane happened, if the guy driver had not altered quickly, it would be him and his family lying in the hospital now. Not to mention he had a baby on board. This kind of change of lane could be forgiven if it only happened once, but this woman did this two more times.	The opposition is not specifically named in comparison

4	To make a request	Directness: Put the request in the initial sentence	Posting: 小编你能写全吗？后续是：这个男人被群众制止后想开车跑，一个出租车司机上前围堵他，结果他用车上的螺丝刀又刺伤了出租车司机！ Literal translation: Sina editor, could you write the whole story? The following up: this guy was stopped by the crowd and tried to run away. A taxi driver blocked him. Then he stabbed the taxi driver with a screw driver in his car!	The statement of request precedes the hedge or a statement of request without any hedging
-4		Indirectness: Hedge before making the request	Posting: 为了我们所有人的生存空间，我们要求媒体公布整个事情的真相及男司机相关资料，网上关于女司机造谣资料一大片，男方神秘的很，这件事我们每个人都不能置身事外，与每个公民息息相关，如果我们以后碰到强权，法律不管用，岂不是被黑致死吗？为了中国的法治，为了我们每个人的明天，必须还原事件真相 Literal translation: In order to protect our living space, we urge the media to release the truth of this incident and the background of this male driver. There are lots of rumors about the female driver, but the guy remains mysterious. Nobody should be indifferent here. It is an urgent matter to every citizen. If we encounter a power but the law can't protect us, won't we be killed without knowing? For the rule of law and for the future of everyone, the truth must be revealed!	The hedge precedes the request
5	To inform (especially of bad news or negative messages)	Directness: Put key information at the beginning of the message.	Posting: 前阵子河南公布的终身禁驾的 100 名司机中，男司机 99，女司机 1 人。禁驾比例是 99:1，什么你说男司机比女司机人多，嗯特地查了一下，司机男女比例 3:1[拜拜]还在这黑女司机的傻逼，你确定你不是在打自己的脸？纵然这位司机有不对的地方，一男人不依不饶地把女人打进医院，还有人叫好？你全家都炸	Key information is placed at the beginning OR key information is precise and explicit

			了吧傻逼 Literal translation: A while ago, Henan Province released [a list of] 100 drivers whose license were permanently revoked: 99 of them were male drivers and only 1 female driver. This ratio is 99 to 1. What? You said male drivers outnumbered female drivers significantly? Well, I do the fact check. The ratio of male drivers to female drivers is 3 to 1. Every one who is railing at female drivers here, are you sure you are not slapping your own face? Although this female driver did have misconduct, but a guy persistently beat her so hard, and so many of you are cheering for the guy. What is the matter with you guys!	
-5		Indirectness: Put key information in latter part of the message	Posting: 太气愤了～必须人肉这个咬人的畜生，我 TM 最看不惯男人打女人，谁能人肉出来他私信我，赏金壹万元整（¥10000 元整），说到做到！我和他比划比划。 Literal translation: so outraged! We need to *human flesh search* [2]this beast who bites human! I f*** hate man who beats woman. Anyone who can dox him, message me! I will reward 10,000 Yuan (about US$ 1500). I mean it!	Key information is placed at latter part or key information is indistinct
6	To criticize	Directness: Put forward the criticism directly	Posting: 评论叫好声一片，中国男人没救了。我倒很想问问叫好的那些男人，你变道过么？你开过不合理大灯么？你闯过红灯么？人行道不减速反而加速过没有？你占用过应急车道么？但凡有一次就别特么瞎 BB，没人打你是因为你是男的而不是你没违规！！！ Literal translation: In the comments there is so much cheering for this guy. Chinese men are doomed! I really want to ask those guys: have you switched lane while driving? Have you used your high beam light improperly? Have you run a traffic light? Have you ever	The criticism precedes affirmative message, compliment or euphemistic expression OR criticism without any compliment

[2] Human flesh search: “人肉”, a Chinese term equivalent to “dox” in English.

			escalated even when you were crossing the pedestrian lane? If you've ever done any of these, shut up please! Nobody beat you because you are men, not because you did not break the traffic rules.	
-6		Indirectness: Compliment before criticizing	Posting: 变道是不对，对方一个女人，身为一个男的，也真是下得去手，真是可恶 Literal translation: Changing lane is not right, but she is a woman! As a man, how dare you beat her! You are so hateful!	Compliment or affirmative message precedes criticism
7	To quote	Directness: Direct quotation	Posting: 被一条评论看笑了：要是打雷吓到你孩子，估计你要去日天。 Literal translation: I laughed when I saw this comment: if the thunder frightened your kid, I guess you will go screw the thunder.	A direct quote of the actual words
-7		Indirectness: Indirect quotation or paraphrase	Posting: 一些男人活的一点都不男人。海贼王里山治说过，不管怎么样，都不会动手打女人。@OPiece 海贼王 @海贼王公会 Literal translation: Some men did not live like real men. Sanji in *One Piece*[3] once said that no matter what happened, he would never beat a woman.	A paraphrase of the original texts or words
8	To deal with a situation where one is pressed for an opinion	Directness: Be honest and take a clear position	Posting: 进水脑袋：回复@欧巴飞扬:真心回答你，是我连追上去理论都不会。开车那么多年，这种事太多了，只要一半的情况去打人，我可能现在还在里面坐起的。Literal translation: User A (in response to User B): Let me answer your question honestly. If it were me, I would not even try to catch her and argue. Have been driving for so many years, I have seen this kind of things too much. If I beat people in half of those occasions, I would still be sitting in jail right now. User B (in response to User A): Go away! Violence cannot solve any	Users speaking out thoughts and opinions directly to make one's position clear.

[3] *One Piece* is a very popular Japanese manga series.

			problem. Don't disgust me if you know nothing.	
-8		Indirectness: Respond with an ambiguous position	Posting: enya 幸幸-死在东卷里：回复@曾大沙: 占理不是这个意思？所以请你解释一下什么叫男人占理 曾大沙：回复@enya 幸幸-死在东卷里: 不如你说说看对这件事的观点？ Literal translation: User A comments on User B's posting: So being reasonable is not what it means? So please explain to me what is "the man is being reasonable"? User B replies to User A: Why don't you talk about your opinion on this incident?	Users not taking a clear stance
9	To deal with people who don't know factual information that they are supposed to know	Directness: Correct this person or explain the matter directly	Posting: 卷袖江南-五行缺土：回复@Grey 奈奈: 今天出来行车记录仪了，被打者是故意的。正常来说，一个男人身边有老婆孩子时还打人，是吓到家人了才忍无可忍。 Literal translation: User C (in response to User D): The EDR video is released today. The one who was beaten [the female driver] did this purposely. Normally, a man with his wife and children wouldn't beat people. He cannot tolerate because she frightened his family.	Correcting the factual information or Explaining the information directly to the person
-9		Indirectness: Does not out people's mistake directly	Posting: 微博评论的全是不了解事情真相的，有时候眼睛看到的不一定是真的，等有良心的记者了解清楚情况再开骂，不能相信一面之词 Literal translation: So many comments are ignorant of the truth. Sometimes what you see is not the truth. We need to wait for journalists with consciousness to reveal the truth. We cannot just believe one side of the story.	Avoiding correcting or explaining directly the factual information or other matters
10	Miscellaneous	Hard to identify the semantical meaning in the context	Postings that contain nothing but emoji, interjection, or other semantically unclear expression (i.e. "hehe," and "excuse me")	

3.3.4 Challenges and revisions in the development of coding

During the developmental stage of the coding scheme, I ran into data that are difficult to identify or categorize and that lay on the boundaries of some of the categories' definitions. To tackle these problem, I add a tenth category "Miscellaneous" and request the coders to assign multiple codes to a single posting when more than one strategies are identified. In addition to verbal texts, multi-media production will also be considered as an indispensable part of online communication. In the case of Weibo research, although video, image, audio, and other forms of multi-media production are widely used in the original posts, they are not so commonly applied in comment postings due to the limited posting functions on Weibo. The most commonly used multi-media form in Weibo comment postings is Emoji (see Fig. 2), which usually are displayed as a small image depicting a human face or a special scenario. It will be too arbitrary to put Emoji either in the category of directness or indirectness because its role in constructing persuasion is highly context-dependent.

Most of the strategies listed in Table 3.1 can be distinguished by examining the structure or organization of the texts; however, some strategies that are closely associated with meaning interpretation require close reading of the text and context. As for strategy #2 paragraph organization pattern, despite the word limit of 140 words applied on Weibo, I still choose to keep strategy #2 in the coding scheme because long Weibo postings do exist, and a long posting might convey quite complicated information with relatively complex structure. As for strategy #7 "Direct Quotation", strategy #8 "Speak out directly", and strategy # 9 "To correct or explain directly", since these strategies usually occur in a dialogue-like, interactive context where more than one users/agents are involved, I ask coders to look beyond the semantic content and to read the whole context as well so to acquire a better understanding of the use of strategy. Coders are

required to trace the interactive, multi-postings context through “search” function in the database. While using quoting strategy, sometimes users will choose to retweet the original post and attach one’s own comment. In the coding scheme, I consider this action to be direct quote because it presents the other user verbatim.

Here is an example to show how to determine strateg#9. As you can see, the identification is judged on the context.

Aazsxdcfv：回复@Hiphop_丹丹:调动卫星不是一件简单的事，卫星轨道变轨需要协调全世界同高度同轨道的其他卫星。卫星变轨能力极差，微小的调整就需要大量燃料，也就意味着会提前结束卫星寿命，一次性变轨十颗卫星代价极大，可以说是以亿计算的。事情不是你相信的那么简单的。

Literal translation:

Moblizing satellites is not an easy thing. Changing orbit needs the coordination of all the other satellites at the same altitude. A satellite cannot change its orbit easily, and a minor adjustment will cost huge amount of fuel, which means the life span of the satellite will be affected. Now [our government] change orbits for ten satellites, this will cost millions. Things are not as simple as you thought.

So here, the knowledge of satellite will not be considered something that everyone should know, because it is a domain-specific knowledge that ordinary users would not be aware of.

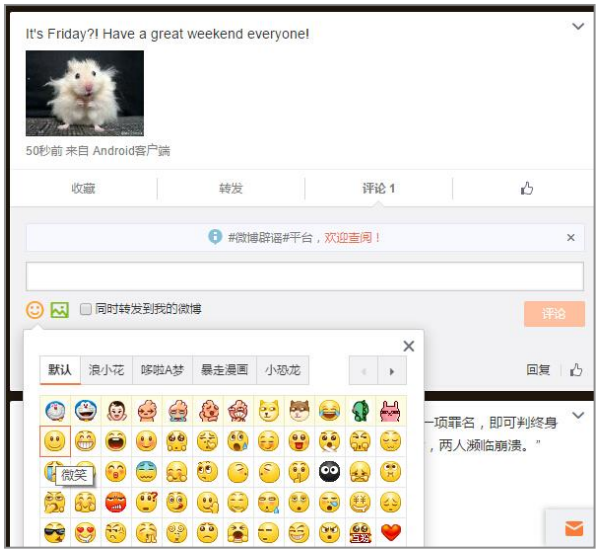

Figure 3.2 A screenshot of a Weibo post with emoji list

3.4 Selection of Weibo postings

Here is the detailed information about each post.

Table 3.3 Weibo posting analysis

Topic	Original post entry	Posted by (Author)	Genre and delivery form	Number of postings received [4]	Publication date of original post
The missing flight MH370	1	CCTV News	News report; written text	1,303	Mar 10, 2014
Reckless driving and female driver	2	SINA News	News report; written text, hyperlinks, video, and images	11,459	May 3, 2015
iPhone lost a lawsuit of intellectual property in China	3	People's Daily	News report; hyperlinks, written text and images	3,177	Jun 18, 2016
Intellectual property day	4	People's Daily	Public campaign; written text and images	277	Apr 26, 2016
The debate about sharing	5	Independent blogger 1	Accusation; written text and images	869	Aug 21, 2016

[4] Including comments and retweets.

open resource and intellectual property	6	Independent blogger 2 (a scholar)	Response to an accusation; written text and images	71	Aug 21, 2016
Female Ph.D. in archeology and marriage	7	Weibo User P	Weibo post; written text	4,689	Nov 1, 2016
The rise and fall of Tibetan mastiff industry	8	Sanlian Life Weekly	Long report (over 3,000 words); written text and hyperlinks	401	Jun20, 2016
A translated version of String Theory	9	Independent Blogger 3	Popular science; blog post that contains an animation video and written texts	1,218	Aug 13, 2016
Nuclear fuel cycling	10	Independent Blogger 4	Popular science; blog post consisting of written text and images	1,246	Aug 11, 2016
Lian Yun Gang Incident: A local protest against building a nuclear recycling plan	11	Verified local media account	Repost; written text and images	606	Aug 8, 2016
Total				**25,316**	

3.5 Coders and coding procedures

The categorization of Weibo postings needs coders. In this section I will discuss the coders' credentials, coding training, inter-coder reliability, and coding procedures.

3.5.1 Coder's background and training

A total of five coders were recruited to code Weibo postings. All of the coders speak Mandarin Chinese as their first language, and they are fully competent to read and write Chinese at a professional and academic level as all of them are graduate students majoring in Applied Linguistics. Before the coding process started, all the coders received a two-hour training session

and passed a test to assess their understanding of the coding scheme as well as each individual's coding consistency.

3.5.2 Inter-coder reliability

Inter-coder reliability, or sometimes being called inter-coder agreement, is "a measure of the extent to which coders assign the same coders to the same set of data" (Geisler & Swarts, in process). Achieving an acceptable level of inter-coder reliability is an essential part of the validation process. As Neuendort (2016) points out, inter-coder reliability is "essential" and a "necessary criterion" for a valid and reliable study when human coding is adopted. However, the use of inter-coder reliability has not been fully applied in communication studies. For example, a review study of 80 content analysis papers published in the renowned journal *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* between 1998 and 2014 shows that 26% did not report reliability assessment, and only 16% of the studies report the reliability results for all relevant variables (Riff, Lacy, & Fico, 2014).

In this study, as coders are required to categorize each piece of Weibo postings according to a coding scheme, the coding results will be nominal data, thus, Cohen's Kappa is an appropriate choice of inter-coder reliability index.

3.5.3 Coding procedure

The coding procedure consists of four stages: coder training, test, coding, and quality control (See Fig. 3.3.). In the training stage, every coder is required to participate in a two-hour training, in which I introduce the purpose and design of the study, explain the coding scheme, and discuss examples for each category. After the training session, each coder is required to take a test in which each of them is assigned 100 postings. These postings are pre-coded by me, and coders need to reach an agreement over 80% to pass the test. Coders who fail the test will need to

take the training session and they can not start coding until they pass the test. In the coding stage, each coder is assigned 2,000 to 8,000 postings that are randomly selected. Quality control measure takes place during the coding stage. I randomly pair two coders and assign them the same set of postings (about 200 to 400 postings each time). Cohen' *Kappa* is calculated as inter-coder reliability, and the posting that receive the same categorization by two coders will be put into the final data set, whereas postings that receive unmatched codes from two coders will be sent to a third coder to be categorized.

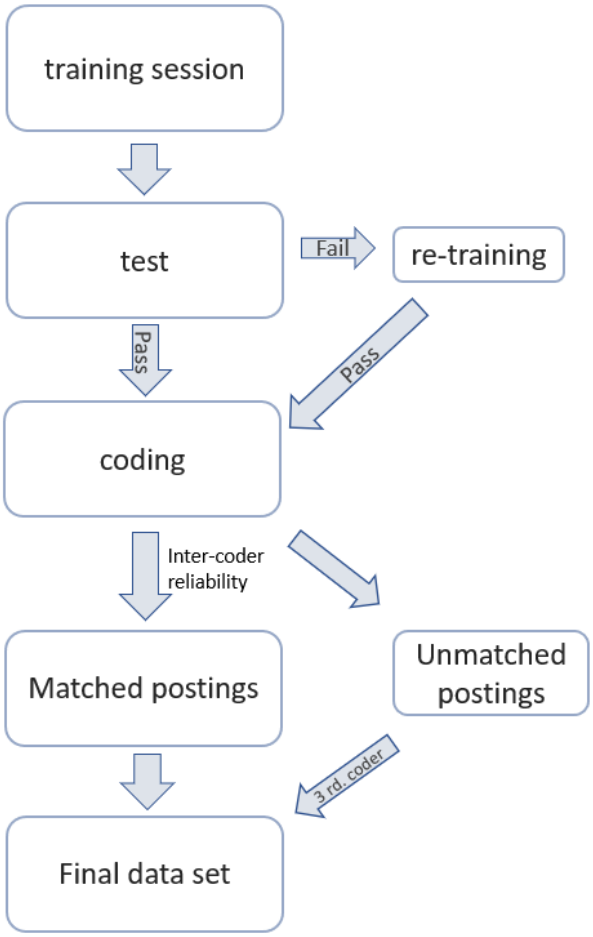

Figure 3.3 Coding Procedure

4 DATA ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I will conduct a detailed analysis of the data set. First, I will look into how each strategy has been used in different contexts by calculating the frequency and percentage. By examining each strategy, including both directness and indirectness, I will answer the research question "does a preference for directness or indirectness exist in Weibo postings." Second, in order to explore the occurrence pattern of rhetorical strategies, I group original posts according to topics/themes and investigate users' preferences of rhetorical strategies while responding to posts that are varied in length, genre, delivery form, and topics. Third, recognizing the fluidity in rhetorical preference, I also examine the longitudinal development of users' choices in a case of breaking news. Last but not least, the authenticity of Weibo postings is briefly discussed as well.

4.1 Analysis: strategy by strategy

This section analyzes how each strategy has been used in different contexts. By examining the frequency and percentage of each strategy, including both directness and indirectness, I tend to answer the research question "does a preference for directness or indirectness exist in Weibo postings" and “what direct strategies are most preferred by Weibo users.”

4.1.1 Frequency of rhetorical strategies

As Table 4.1 shows, a total of 25,316 user-generated comments are analyzed. The frequencies of rhetorical situations exhibit significant disparities across all the categories, a result indicating that Weibo users heavily rely on a small number of strategies while responding to an original post. Category #1 “to argue or to comment” is the most used one, with 78.9%, 17,071 pieces of comments either arguing or commenting (See Figure 4.2). The second most used category is #6 “to criticize”, with 22.6%, 5,760 pieces of comments containing criticism. The

third most used category is category #3 “to compare”, with 10.08%, 2,551 pieces of postings showing signs of comparison. The other categories are relatively less used. For example, category #8 “to deal with pressed opinion” only appear 87 times, which only accounts for 0.34% of the dataset.

Table 4.1 Overall frequency of rhetorical strategies

Post entry #	Comments	To argue/comment		Long postings		To compare		To request		To inform		To criticize		To quote		Pressed opinion		To correct		Miscellaneous
		Di	In	Di	In	Di	In	Di	In	Di	In	Di	In	Di	In	Di	In	Di	In	
1	1303	817	159	12	21	365	16	77	15	27	5	79	61	258	0	0	0	6	4	42
2	11459	8065	1093	103	165	791	308	190	23	92	14	2421	680	124	19	8	3	15	1	354
3	3177	2701	117	14	9	43	9	56	3	93	43	170	56	7	3	0	0	83	3	257
4	277	126	37	9	2	6	2	37	7	6	0	25	6	4	0	0	0	4	0	55
5	869	278	160	35	56	113	17	54	36	24	5	110	83	35	8	33	7	20	11	46
6	71	20	20	4	4	6	2	7	5	2	0	7	6	6	0	8	2	9	0	2
7	4689	3389	694	39	26	708	3	193	40	3	1	1053	430	252	55	17	0	9	1	299
8	401	210	24	3	2	4	1	26	3	14	0	31	8	24	0	0	0	3	0	97
9	1218	389	486	20	6	34	2	99	19	0	0	15	3	16	20	0	0	1	0	261
10	1246	596	43	132	23	22	14	103	28	55	9	200	40	61	13	9	0	35	10	61
11	606	480	74	4	1	80	5	40	13	4	1	211	65	11	7	0	0	7	2	29
Total	25316	17071	2907	375	315	2172	379	882	192	320	78	4322	1438	798	125	75	12	192	32	1503

Table 4.2 Frequency and percentage of each strategy

Rhetorical situation		Frequency		Percentage	
to argue/comment	Direct	17071	19978	67.43%	78.91%
	Indirect	2907		11.48%	
long postings	Direct	375	690	1.48%	2.73%
	Indirect	315		1.24%	
to compare	Direct	2172	2551	8.58%	10.08%
	Indirect	379		1.50%	
to request	Direct	882	1074	3.48%	4.24%
	Indirect	192		0.76%	
to inform	Direct	320	398	1.26%	1.57%
	Indirect	78		0.31%	
to criticize	Direct	4322	5760	17.07%	22.75%
	Indirect	1438		5.68%	
to quote	Direct	798	923	3.15%	3.65%
	Indirect	125		0.49%	
pressed opinion	Direct	75	87	0.30%	0.34%
	Indirect	12		0.05%	
to correct	Direct	192	224	0.76%	0.88%
	Indirect	32		0.13%	
miscellaneous		1503	1503	5.94%	5.94%

In this section, I will analyze how users apply each direct strategy respectively in different rhetorical situations. For every strategy, I will start with an overview of its frequency, and then provide a detailed account with selected postings demonstrating typical usage and special usage.

4.1.2 Strategy #1: To argue or comment

Table 4.3 Directness/Indirectness in rhetorical situation 1

Post entry		Comments	Di		In	
1	The missing flight MH370	1303	817	62.70%	159	12.20%
2	Reckless driving and female drivers	11459	8065	70.38%	1093	9.54%
3	iPhone lost a lawsuit of intellectual property in China	3177	2701	85.02%	117	3.68%
4	Intellectual property day	277	126	45.49%	37	13.36%
5	Accusation made by Huo Zai Lun Dun	869	278	31.99%	160	18.41%
6	Lu Hun Rong's response to Huo Zai Lun Dun	71	20	28.17%	20	28.17%
7	Female Ph.D. in archeology and marriage	4689	3389	72.28%	694	14.80%
8	The rise and fall of Tibetan mastiff industry	401	210	52.37%	24	5.99%
9	A translated version of String Theory	1218	389	31.94%	486	39.90%
10	Nuclear fuel cycling	1246	596	47.83%	43	3.45%
11	Lian Yun Gang Incident	606	480	79.21%	74	12.21%
	Total	25316	17071	67.43%	2907	11.48%

The rhetorical situation "to argue or to comment" is the most used category (See Table 4.2). Put in another way, over 78% of the chance, users are arguing or expressing their opinions under the original posts. The high percentage of category #1 indicates that, at least in the case of the selected posts, "to argue or to comment" is the most prominent purpose of Weibo users. As Table 4.3 shows, in most cases–entry #1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, and 11 –directness is used far more frequently than indirectness. The only two exceptions are entry #6 and #9

How should we interpret the frequency variations across different posts? The explanation could be the composition of account followers and the nature of the content. As I have illustrated earlier in this chapter, entry #6 is a post responding to an accusation of content piracy. The

author of entry 6 is an independent blogger who is dedicated to sharing academic and intellectual resources for free. Although no verified identity is shown on this blogger's profile, it is widely believed that he/she is a college professor. Given the specific focus of this account in terms of content and purpose, it can be inferred that the followers are most likely users who have received higher education, namely college students, college professors, teachers, scholars, and intellectuals. In the case of post entry #9, the content is about string theory, a topic that requires specific domain knowledge to be understood. Another noticeable fact about post entry #9 is its use of multimedia. In addition to written text, the post also contains a video with Chinese subtitle. The complexity of the content generates more indirect arguments and comments. On the other hand, post entry #1,2 and 11, the three pieces of breaking news, generate overwhelmingly direct arguments, many of which are sole arguments or opinions without any back-up evidence.

Among the great number of postings, there are also some creative use of indirectness.

In the case of post entry #7 on the topic of marriage of female Ph.D., one user's posting responds as follows:

苏智慧 2016 幸运 A：太监甲："我还是喜欢赵飞燕，杨玉环太胖减分比较大。"太监乙："但是杨贵妃白啊，赵飞燕太瘦了不好生孩子，分减光"——管你 P 事啊？

Literary translation:

User: Eunuch A: I like Zhao Feiyan more. Yang Yuhuan[5] is too chubby, so she loses many points. Eunuch B: But Yang Yuhuan got very light and white skin tone. Zhao Feiyan is too skinny, which is not good to deliver babies. Her points will be cut off. — It's none of your business.

[5] Zhao Feiyan is an empress during the Han Dynasty. Yang Yuhuan is the consort of Emperor Xuanzong of Tang Dynasty. Both Zhao and Yang are considered as famous beauties in Chinese history.

In this posting, the user first tells a fictional story in a conversational form, and then puts out his/her argument. The story can be regarded as the supporting evidence of the argument as the context of the story makes the point very clear.

4.1.3 Strategy #2: To comment with 120 words or more

Table 4.4 Directness/Indirectness in rhetorical situation 2

Post entry		Comments	Di		In	
1	The missing flight MH370	1303	12	0.92%	21	1.61%
2	Reckless driving and female drivers	11459	103	0.90%	165	1.44%
3	iPhone lost a lawsuit of intellectual property in China	3177	14	0.44%	9	0.28%
4	Intellectual property day	277	9	3.25%	2	0.72%
5	Accusation made by Huo Zai Lun Dun	869	35	4.03%	56	6.44%
6	Lu Hun Rong's response to Huo Zai Lun Dun	71	4	5.63%	4	5.63%
7	Female Ph.D. in archeology and marriage	4689	39	0.83%	26	0.55%
8	The rise and fall of Tibetan mastiff industry	401	3	0.75%	2	0.50%
9	A translated version of String Theory	1218	20	1.64%	6	0.49%
10	Nuclear fuel cycling	1246	132	10.59%	23	1.85%
11	Lian Yun Gang Incident	606	4	0.66%	1	0.17%
	Total	25316	375	1.48%	315	1.24%

The rhetorical situation "to comment with 120 words or more" applies to long postings. This is one of the least used category (See Table 4.2). Among all the selected postings, only 2.73% of the chance users are likely to leave a comment that is longer than 120 words. The low percentage of category #2 indicates that Weibo users do not favor the use of long postings. Since the frequency of long postings is very low in every selected post, the discussion of preferences will hinder its reliability because the disparity in frequencies might not reflect a systematic trait.

It is noteworthy that post entry #5, 6, and 10 are the only three that show frequency over 5%. As for post entry #5, which is post accusing another independent blogger of content piracy,

over 10% of the comments it receives are long postings, with indirectness (6.44%) slightly more than directness (4.03%). In the case of post entry #6, which is a post responding to post entry #5, over 10% of the comments are long postings, with directness and indirectness share the same weight. When it comes to post entry #10, a post about nuclear cycling, users' preference skews to directness as 10.59%. This post contains an article of over 3,000 words and multiple figures about the structure of an atom, and the topic also requires specific domain knowledge to be understood. Although the topic of nuclear recycling seems quite distant to users' everyday life, it still generates a considerable number of long postings because it hits a kairotic moment in China. Around June 2016, the debate about nuclear energy was at its peak because the plan of building a nuclear fuel recycle plant in Lian Yungang stirred concerns about safety issues. Users could very easily relate the topic of this post to everyday life; therefore, many users were able to write rich content regarding this topic.

4.1.4 Strategy #3: To compare (naming strategy)

Table 4.5 Directness/Indirectness in rhetorical situation 3

Post entry		Comments	Di		In	
1	The missing flight MH370	1303	365	28.01%	16	1.23%
2	Reckless driving and female drivers	11459	791	6.90%	308	2.69%
3	iPhone lost a lawsuit of intellectual property in China	3177	43	1.35%	9	0.28%
4	Intellectual property day	277	6	2.17%	2	0.72%
5	Accusation made by Huo Zai Lun Dun	869	113	13.00%	17	1.96%
6	Lu Hun Rong's response to Huo Zai Lun Dun	71	6	8.45%	2	2.82%
7	Female Ph.D. in archeology and marriage	4689	708	15.10%	3	0.06%
8	The rise and fall of Tibetan mastiff industry	401	4	1.00%	1	0.25%
9	A translated version of String Theory	1218	34	2.79%	2	0.16%
10	Nuclear fuel cycling	1246	22	1.77%	14	1.12%
11	Lian Yun Gang Incident	606	80	13.20%	5	0.83%
	Total	25316	2172	8.58%	379	1.50%

The rhetorical situation “to compare” is the third most used category (See Table 4.2). Among all the selected postings, 10.08% of the postings could be categorized as this rhetorical situation, meaning that one out of ten times users will compare different opinions in their comments. In the 2,551 postings that intend to make comparison, 2,172 pieces of postings adopt a direct approach by directly naming the opposing, apparently a significantly more favored approach.

Although “to compare” is a frequently used situation, users seem to have very different preference in terms of when to use it. As Table 4.5 shows, in post entry #5, 7, and 11, over 10% of the comments are using direct naming strategies. This percentage suggests active conversation among users because making comparison is a two-way process that involves both information input and output: one will need to read and assess an opinion and respond with his or her evaluation and judgement. It may also be inferred that higher percentage of comparison use correlates to higher chance of rational, meaningful communication as users are spending more time reading and responding.

An interesting phenomenon to note is the coexistence of directness and indirectness in one posting: user can conduct a speech act employing a direct strategy while a second speech act with an indirect approach is also present. Here is an example.

A posting selected from post entry #4:

benedicter：版权意识只会越来越重视，，，，之前就听过一个人说“大陆人只想用不要钱的东西”当听到这种话时，身为他们口中的“大陆人”觉得挺悲哀的，感觉就好像说我们只是贪便宜 (-3)

Literal translation: Copyright awareness will be valued more and more… I have heard one guy say “[Chinese] mainlanders only want to use products that won’t cost them anything.”

Every time I hear this, as a "mainlander" in their words, I feel very sad. I feel they are calling us cheapskates.

In this posting, the user responds to the topic of World Intellectual Property Day with multiple rhetorical strategies. While introducing an opinion to the context, the user applies an indirect approach as he/she chooses not to call out the name directly. Meanwhile, the user also employs a direct quoting approach by quoting the exact words of the opposing party. The co-existence of directness and indirectness tells how complicated the rhetorical situation can become.

4.1.5 Strategy #4: To request

Table 4.6 Directness/Indirectness in rhetorical situation 4

Post entry		Comments	Di		In	
1	The missing flight MH370	1303	77	5.91%	15	1.15%
2	Reckless driving and female drivers	11459	190	1.66%	23	0.20%
3	iPhone lost a lawsuit of intellectual property in China	3177	56	1.76%	3	0.09%
4	Intellectual property day	277	37	13.36%	7	2.53%
5	Accusation made by Huo Zai Lun Dun	869	54	6.21%	36	4.14%
6	Lu Hun Rong's response to Huo Zai Lun Dun	71	7	9.86%	5	7.04%
7	Female Ph.D. in archeology and marriage	4689	193	4.12%	40	0.85%
8	The rise and fall of Tibetan mastiff industry	401	26	6.48%	3	0.75%
9	A translated version of String Theory	1218	99	8.13%	19	1.56%
10	Nuclear fuel cycling	1246	103	8.27%	28	2.25%

As Table 4.2 shows, the rhetorical situation #4 "to request" is identified in 1,074 pieces of postings, which accounts for 4.24% of all the selected postings. Among all the selected postings, direct requesting accounts for 3.48% whereas indirect requesting only accounts for 0.76% (see Table 4.6). Overall, directness is much preferred by users, but the cases of entry #5 and #6—notably two entries posted by independent bloggers who are having an online debate

about copyright and intellectual property—are the only ones that show a relatively close margin between directness and indirectness.

A strategy commonly used in professional communication, the requesting strategies on Weibo has evolved into a number of variations. The first variation, probably the most traditional usage of this category, is requesting information. Here is an example of direct requesting from post entry 9 “String theory”.”

Tiffanykuo-：回复@spino 爱运动: 弱弱的问一句九维和十维呢？

Literal translation: Tiffanykuo-: responding to spino 爱运动: I have a humble question, how about dimension nine and dimension ten?

User *Tiffanykuo* directly poses the question asking details about the ninth and tenth dimensions. This post represents a typical scenario of requesting.

Another noticeable variation of requesting strategy is requesting a certain action. Here I include three sample posting to illustrate this special usage.

In entry 11 ”Lian Yun Gang incident”, one user leaves a comment as follows:

用户 5963718410：各位，顶上去，顶上头条

Literal translation: user 5963718410: Everyone, bump me up[6]! Bump it to the top!

This user is openly calling for action as he/she urges other users to “bump up” the message and make the post more visible to the entire Weibo community.

In entry #4 “World intellectual property day” posted by *People’s Daily*, one user responds as follows:

雨靡的天空：虽说盗版不好，但是正版能否把价钱稍微降低点呢！

[6] 顶(translation: to bump) is known to the Chinese user as a way to show support to a piece of post. The more “likes” a post receive, the better chance it gets to appear in the front row of a comment thread and consequently receive more attention from readers.

Literal translation: user(雨屠的天空): although piracy is bad, but could the original ones low the price a little!

This posting is categorized as indirectness because it employs a hedge "although piracy is bad" before putting forward the request. Unlike in business and professional situation, a request on Weibo, as I observe, does not always points to an identifiable requestee.; on the contrary, a lot of times the request sounds more like a call for action directing to the entire online community.

Here is another example demonstrating a request calling for action.

In post entry #2 "Reckless driving", one user leaves a comment as follows:

充满斗志的修言酱：看到评论里面居然有那么多傻逼，所以说，姑娘们，决定处对象之前一定要看看对方的社交工具，有时候内心扭曲是从表面上看不出来的！！比如有几个说打得好的还长得人模狗样的！！完全看不出三观如此崩坏啊！！

Literal translation: user(充满斗志的修言酱): seeing there are so many douchebags in the comments, so girls, before you accept a guy make sure you check his social media. Sometimes a twisted mind cannot be seen from the surface!! There are a few guys in the comments yelling "[beating the women is] well done"!! It's so hard to detect such collapsed three views[7]!

In this case, the user is requesting other female users pay attention to a guy's world view before entering into a relationship. Regardless of its relevance to the topic of reckless driving, this call for action appeals to a large group of young female users. Given the widespread nature of this incident, this request does not go to any specific users, but a much larger population in the

[7] In the Chinese context, *three views* usually refer to a person's view and philosophy regarding the world, life, and value. The English equivalence should be *world view*.

society. Using the request strategy to call for attention or call for action shows that the users are fully aware of the openness of Weibo, and they are making efforts to initiate changes.

4.1.6 Strategy #5: To inform

Table 4.7 Directness/Indirectness in rhetorical situation 5

Post entry		Comments	Di		In	
1	The missing flight MH370	1303	27	2.07%	5	0.38%
2	Reckless driving and female drivers	11459	92	0.80%	14	0.12%
3	iPhone lost a lawsuit of intellectual property in China	3177	93	2.93%	43	1.35%
4	Intellectual property day	277	6	2.17%	0	0
5	Accusation made by Huo Zai Lun Dun	869	24	2.76%	5	0.58%
6	Lu Hun Rong's response to Huo Zai Lun Dun	71	2	2.82%	0	0
7	Female Ph.D. in archeology and marriage	4689	3	0.06%	1	0.02%
8	The rise and fall of Tibetan mastiff industry	401	14	3.49%	0	
9	A translated version of String Theory	1218	0	0	0	0
10	Nuclear fuel cycling	1246	55	4.41%	9	0.72%
11	Lian Yun Gang Incident	606	4	0.66%	1	0.17%
	Total	25316	320	1.26%	78	0.31%

As Table 4.2 shows, informing strategy in rhetorical situation "to inform" is one of the less frequently used as only 1.57% of selected postings apply this strategy. The distribution of this strategy varies greatly among the eleven posts (See Table 4.7). Post entry #2 *reckless driving*, #7 *female Ph.D. and marriage*, #9 *string theory*, and #11 *Lian Yun Gang incident* have the lowest percentage of informing strategy whereas post entry #10 *nuclear fuel cycling*, #8 *the Tibetan mastiff*, and #3 *iPhone law suit* have the highest percentage of informing strategy. The highest frequency appears in post entry #10 (directness 4.41%), and lowest frequency is 0, meaning no posting has the intention of informing others with information or news.

What factors cause this disparity? The answer might lie in the topics and the broader rhetorical situations. As for the cases of post entry #10 *reclear recycling*and #8 *the Tibetan mastiff*, both posts provide long texts of more than 3,000 words, either in the form of a long post or a hyperlink to a magazine article. Moreover, the choice of using long texts does not seem random because both posts touch upon topics that readers will quickly relate to their everyday life. For example, post entry #10 includes a popular science article, attempting to educate its readers about basic knowledge of nuclear fuel cycling. This post comes out at a kairotic moment as the public is very engaged in a national debate about a plan to build a nuclear recycling plan. For the public, on the one hand, they learn new knowledge about nuclear fuel cycling; on the other hand, they can easily relate to the article to the debate about possible consequences and risks of nuclear energy. In the case of the Tibetan mastiff industry, the magazine article definitely brings back the public memory of the Tibetan mastiff boom two decades ago.

Among all the postings that use informing strategies, directness outweighs indirectness in terms of frequency. As Table 4.7 shows, the numbers of direct approaches in all the posts entries surpass the numbers of indirectness. One possible explanation is the anonymity of online communication makes indirect informing strategies, which in many cases are used to save face and maintain harmony, not necessary. Also, due to the word limit, users will also choose a more "efficient" way to put forward their message.

4.1.7 Strategy #6: To criticize

Table 4.8 Directness/Indirectness in rhetorical situation 6

Post entry		Comments	Di		In	
1	The missing flight MH370	1303	79	6.06%	61	4.68%
2	Reckless driving and female drivers	11459	2421	21.13%	680	5.93%
3	iPhone lost a lawsuit of intellectual property in China	3177	170	5.35%	56	1.76%
4	Intellectual property day	277	25	9.03%	6	2.17%
5	Accusation made by Huo Zai Lun Dun	869	110	12.66%	83	9.55%
6	Lu Hun Rong's response to Huo Zai Lun Dun	71	7	9.86%	6	8.45%
7	Female Ph.D. in archeology and marriage	4689	1053	22.46%	430	9.17%
8	The rise and fall of Tibetan mastiff industry	401	31	7.73%	8	2.00%
9	A translated version of String Theory	1218	15	1.23%	3	0.25%
10	Nuclear fuel cycling	1246	200	16.05%	40	3.21%
11	Lian Yun Gang Incident	606	211	34.82%	65	10.73%
	Total	25316	4322	17.07%	1438	5.68%

As Table 4.2 shows, criticizing strategy is the second most used strategy after strategy "arguing/commenting" as 22.75% of the selected postings express criticism in their comments. The distribution of this strategy varies significantly across eleven posts (See Table 4.8). Post entry #11 *Lian Yun Gang incident*, #7 *female Ph.D. and marriage*, and #2 *reckless driving* have the highest percentage of criticizing strategy while post entry #9 string theory, # 3 iPhone law suit, and #8 the Tibetan mastiff have the lowest percentage.

The explanation to this divergence might lie in the topics and the bigger rhetorical situations. As for the case of entry #2 *reckless driving* and #11 *Lian Yun Gang incident*, as both posts report the outbreak of incidents that readers will quickly relate to their everyday life: post entry #2 along with the comments touches upon the topics of reckless driving, discriminative

stereotype of women being bad drivers, the safety of children, and transportation safety, and post entry #11 reports a local protest against building a nuclear cycling plant in the suburban area of the city, an incident in which local people express deep concerns about the environment and the quality of life. Therefore, the outbreak of an incident draws the attention of readers, and the close proximity to one's everyday life further stirs strong reactions. As a result of these two key factors, a large amount of criticism is formed, which is also reflected in the high percentage of criticizing strategy use.

It is also notable that among all the postings that intend to criticize, the direct approach, which is defined as putting forward the criticism without any preceding complimentary or affirmative message or as some scholars may call it "buffer", significantly exceeds indirect approach in terms of frequency (4322 vs. 1438) and percentage (17.07% vs. 5.68%).

Another noteworthy result is the generally negative correlation in a broad sense rather a strict statistical definition between the use of strategy #5 "to inform" and strategy #6 "to criticize." As the results in Table 4.7 and Table 4.8 illustrate, post entries that show high percentages of informing strategy use, such as #8 *the Tibetan mastiff* and #3 *iPhone law suit*, are among those posts receiving usage of strategy #6 "to criticize," and post entries that show low percentage of informing strategy use, such as #2 *reckless driving*, #7 *female Ph.D. and marriage*, and #11 *Lian Yun Gang* are the ones with high percentage of criticizing.

Question may arise about the distinction between criticizing and trolling. A commonly accepted definition of trolling is "a specific type of malicious online behavior, intended to disrupt interactions, aggravate interactional partners and lure them into fruitless argumentation" (Coles & West, 2016). In this study, although I recognize the critical attitude will very likely be present in trolling messages, I will not categorize trolling as a type of criticizing strategy.

Trolling is defined as responses, either in the form of written texts or visual images, that intend to stir resentment or hate through profanity. Coders are required to differentiate between "criticizing" and "trolling" according to the existence of profanity and their reading of the intentions through the postings. A posting that displays critical attitude with proper language would be categorized as "criticizing" and posting that use profanity to stir hateful emotions will be categorized as "trolling" and put into category #10 "miscellaneous."

4.1.8 Strategy #7: To quote

Table 4.9 Directness/Indirectness in rhetorical situation 7

Post entry		Comments	Di		In	
1	The missing flight MH370	1303	258	19.80%	0	0
2	Reckless driving and female drivers	11459	124	1.08%	19	0.17%
3	iPhone lost a lawsuit of intellectual property in China	3177	7	0.22%	3	0.09%
4	Intellectual property day	277	4	1.44%	0	0
5	Accusation made by Huo Zai Lun Dun	869	35	4.03%	8	0.92%
6	Lu Hun Rong's response to Huo Zai Lun Dun	71	6	8.45%	0	0
7	Female Ph.D. in archeology and marriage	4689	252	5.37%	55	1.17%
8	The rise and fall of Tibetan mastiff industry	401	24	5.99%	0	0
9	A translated version of String Theory	1218	16	1.31%	20	1.64%
10	Nuclear fuel cycling	1246	61	4.90%	13	1.04%
11	Lian Yun Gang Incident	606	11	1.82%	7	1.16%
	Total	25316	798	3.15%	125	0.49%

As Table 4.2 shows, strategy #7 "to quote" is not frequently used. Only 3.65% of the selected postings quote in some way. Overall, directness is much more preferred than indirectness as 3.15% of postings directly quote the exact same words while only 0.49% of selecting use an indirect approach to quote. The only exception is post entry #9 "string theory" as 1.64% of the comments under this post employs indirectness as opposed to 1.31% of directness. It is not safe to claim that in entry #9, users favor indirectness over directness because the margin

is very small, which might be caused by random error in coding. However, the overall tendency to use indirectness is obvious.

I categorize direct retweeting as direct quoting as it will use the exact original words. Here is an example from post entry #7 *female Ph.D. and marriage*.

海蓝 113：看了评论放心了 //@想做浪平的卷毛:凭什么要被你们这种男的评头论足，女生好好努力就是不想嫁给你们这种男的啊，难道你们心里没谱嘛[二哈]

Literal translation: 海蓝 113(the user): I am relieved after seeing this comment. // 想做浪平的卷毛 (another user): Why should [girls] be judged by you guys? Girls work so hard because they don't want to marry guys like you. Aren't you aware of this?

In this posting, the user uses the retweet function in which the posting from the other user will be included. Because the other user's posting is fully presented and it also serves as an indispensable part of the posting by 海蓝 113(the user) regarding semantic meaning, I consider the entire posting an approach of direct quoting.

Another noteworthy feature is that Chinese users tend to quote well-known proverbs, sayings from classics such as *The Analects*[8], *Classic of Poetry*[9], and *Dao De Jing*[10].

Here is an example from the post entry #9 string theory:

Neroli 梦梦：看到那个点线面的那个地方，突然让我想到了《道德经》中的一句话:"道生一，一生二，二生三，三生万物。万物负阴而抱阳，冲气以为和。"

[8] The Analects (Chines: 论语) is a collection of sayings and thoughts of the Chinese philosopher Confucius and his followers. It is regarded as one of the central pieces of Confucianism.

[9] Classic of Poetry (Chinese:诗经) is the oldest existing collection of ancient Chinese poetry, which could date to the Western Zhou period (1046771 BCE).

[10] Dao De Jing(Classic of the Way of Power, Chinese:道德经) is a fundamental text for Taoism, a major school of philosophies as well as an important religion in China.

Literal translation: Neroli 梦梦(the user): seeing the image of point, line, and plane, it reminds me of a sentence in Dao De Jing: Dao begets One (nothingness; or reason of being), One begets Two (yin and yang), Two begets Three (Heaven, Earth and Man; or yin, yang and breath qi), Three begets all things. All things carry the females and embrace the male. And by breathing together, they live in harmony (Lao Tzu, trans. 1992).

4.1.9 Strategy #8: When one is pressed for an opinion

Table 4.10 Directness/Indirectness in rhetorical situation 8

Post entry		Comments	Di		In	
1	The missing flight MH370	1303	0	0	0	0
2	Reckless driving and female drivers	11459	8	0.07%	3	0.03%
3	iPhone lost a lawsuit of intellectual property in China	3177	0	0	0	0
4	Intellectual property day	277	0	0	0	0
5	Accusation made by Huo Zai Lun Dun	869	33	3.80%	7	0.81%
6	Lu Hun Rong's response to Huo Zai Lun Dun	71	8	11.27%	2	2.82%
7	Female Ph.D. in archeology and marriage	4689	17	0.36%	0	0
8	The rise and fall of Tibetan mastiff industry	401	0	0	0	0
9	A translated version of String Theory	1218	0	0	0	0
10	Nuclear fuel cycling	1246	9	0.72%	0	0
11	Lian Yun Gang Incident	606	0	0	0	0
	Total	25316	75	0.30%	12	0.05%

As Table 4.2 shows, only 0.34% of the selected postings can be associated with a rhetorical situation in which one is pressed for an opinion. The situation #8 is the situation that users are least likely to encounter, and accordingly, strategy #8 a is the least used strategy. As Table 4.10 shows, only 0.30% of users directly express their opinions when they feel the pressure to express one's own opinion, and only 0.05% of users choose a more indirect way to express opinions.

The identification of this category relies on close reading of the users' context. Coders judge based on multiple cues on the lexical, semantical, and contextual cues. Here is a dialogue between two users under the post #10 *nuclear recycling*

种花家的豪宝宝：回复@Yvonne0129:呵呵，百度知道是百度知道，一码归一码。百度贴吧里的一些化学吧，物理吧，很多都是一些有专业知识的人，你可以不相信，那我问你，这篇文章，你相信吗？po 主手里有资料文献哦，你呢？你有什么文献？

Yvonne0129：回复@豪宝宝是个超级无敌大傻货:你看到我说信朋友圈了？我若是信朋友圈就不去其他网站搜新闻了。而且我说的在朋友圈看到的，意旨他们抗议这件事。麻烦看文章看全，不要急着反驳。谢谢！

Literal translation:

User A: responding to user B: Hehe, Baidu Zhidao[11] is Baidu Zhidao. It's a different thing. Baidu Tieba[12] has some bars (subgroups), such as Chemistry Bar and Physics Bar; there are many people with professional domain knowledge. You may not believe them, but I want to ask you, do you believe this article? This author has materials and documents, how about you? What documents do you have?

User B responding to User A: Did you ever see me talking about trusting news from the WeChat Friend's Circle? If I believe [news on] Friend's Circle, I would not have searched information on other websites. When I said I saw this in Friend's Circle, I was referring to the

[11] Baidu Zhidao (Baidu Knows, 百度知道) is a collaborative, Web-based, collective intelligence organized in question and answer form. Its concept is very close to its Western counterpart Quora

[12] Baidu Tieba is one of the largest online community in China. Baidu Tieba is bound with Baidu search service, which has a monopoly on the internet search service as Google withdrew from mainland China concerning about governmental censorship.

incident of protesting. When reading an article, please read the whole piece. Don't rush to rebut. Thanks!

In this case, we can identify that user A presses user B for opinions as user A keeps asking questions like "do you believe this article" and "how about you." Responding to User A, User B chooses to not directly provide an answer; instead, User B explains why he/she mentions Friend's Circle and why he/she does not cite "other website" like Baidu Tieba. User B's response avoids directly refuting User A by providing further explanation to an earlier posting.

4.1.10 Strategy #9: To correct

Table 4.11 Directness/Indirectness in rhetorical situation 9

Post entry		Comments	Di		In	
. 1	The missing flight MH370	1303	6	0.46%	4	0.31%
2	Reckless driving and female drivers	11459	15	0.13%	1	0.01%
3	iPhone lost a lawsuit of intellectual property in China	3177	83	2.61%	3	0.09%
4	Intellectual property day	277	4	1.44%	0	0
5	Accusation made by Huo Zai Lun Dun	869	20	2.30%	11	1.27%
6	Lu Hun Rong's response to Huo Zai Lun Dun	71	9	12.68%	0	0
7	Female Ph.D. in archeology and marriage	4689	9	0.19%	1	0.02%
8	The rise and fall of Tibetan mastiff industry	401	3	0.75%	0	0
9	A translated version of String Theory	1218	1	0.08%	0	0
10	Nuclear fuel cycling	1246	35	2.81%	10	0.80%
11	Lian Yun Gang Incident	606	7	1.16%	2	0.33%
	Total	25316	192	0.76%	32	0.13%

As Table 4.2 shows, strategy #9 "to correct" is one of the least used strategy as only 0.88% of the selected postings use this strategy. The distribution among all the post entries also varies significantly as some post entries has relatively high percentage such as post entry 6 (12.68%) and some post entries has extremely low percentage such as post entry #9. Strategy #9 also shows a noticeable disparity between the use of directness and indirectness. While 192

postings employ a direct approach, only 32 postings display; in every post entry that uses this strategy, directness surpasses indirectness in numbers, a finding that indicates a preference of directness.

When would users correct others? As Table 4.11 demonstrates, post entry #6, #10, and #2 are the three posts having the highest percentage of correcting strategy. All these posts touch upon topics that require certain professional or domain knowledge but also can be easily related to everyday life. On the contrary, posts #9 and #2 have the lowest percentage. Post #9 is a multimedia form explaining string theory. Although it does require domain knowledge, it is quite distant from users' everyday life; therefore, most users will not be able to comment with domain knowledge, let alone to correct.

Here is an example of correcting strategy from post entry #6.

塞塔玛的塔酱：港道理，水印是微博默认功能，上传图片就会有，这位是不用新浪微博不知道吧

User 塞塔玛的塔酱: Let's be reasonable. The watermark [on the other blogger's posts] is an automatic function on Weibo. Once an image is uploaded, it will have the watermark. Does this guy not know this because he is not using Weibo?

This user is defending blogger Lu Hun Rong, the author of this post. As some users criticize Lu for putting watermarks on the images accredited to the other blogger, this user is defending Lu by correcting and stating the watermark policy. The watermark policy is wildly acknowledged on Weibo, which can be seen as an apparent fact. Therefore, this user's posting is identified as directness since it directly points out the mistake.

4.1.11 Strategy #9: To correct

As stated earlier in Chapter 3, category 10 is used for postings that are difficult to identify or categorize regarding semantic meaning.

Table 4.12 Uncategorizable postings

Post entry		Comments	uncategorizable postings	
1	The missing flight MH370	1303	42	3.22%
2	Reckless driving and female drivers	11459	354	3.09%
3	iPhone lost a lawsuit of intellectual property in China	3177	257	8.09%
4	Intellectual property day	277	55	19.86%
5	Accusation made by Huo Zai Lun Dun	869	46	5.29%
6	Lu Hun Rong's response to Huo Zai Lun Dun	71	2	2.82%
7	Female Ph.D. in archeology and marriage	4689	299	6.38%
8	The rise and fall of Tibetan mastiff industry	401	97	24.19%
9	A translated version of String Theory	1218	261	21.43%
10	Nuclear fuel cycling	1246	61	4.90%
11	Lian Yun Gang Incident	606	29	4.79%
	Total	25316	1503	5.94%

As Table 4.12 shows, uncategorized postings consist of 5.95% of the selected postings, which makes it the fourth most used category.

There are three major types of postings in this category. The first type is postings of sole emoji. As illustrated in Figure 3.1, Weibo has provided its users a variety of emojis, but the semantic meaning of an emoji depends on the contexts. The use of emoji in online communication might be a double-edged sword: adding an emoji to a written text might enrich the expression, but simply responding with a sole emoji will not add clarity to the message. For the latter, when a user simply responding to the original post with an emoji, the meaning and intention would be too vague to interpret we categorize it as "miscellaneous." The second type is trolling. As I have stated earlier, trolling is defined as responses that use profanity to stir

resentment or hate. The third type is responses without a clear meaning. For example, a posting with one word “haha” is hard to be categorized because without enough contextual clue, its meaning, either semantic or rhetorical, is very hard to capture.

4.2 Case-by-case analysis

Through detailed analysis of directness and indirectness in each rhetorical situation, I have demonstrated how the use of rhetorical strategies vary across the selected posts. It is particularly noteworthy that the occurrence of strategies exhibits some sort of a pattern, especially regarding occurrence in original posts. In this section, I will focus on each individual post entry as the analysis unit and look into the occurrence pattern of different strategies. I group together post entries that share a similar theme and then analyze the occurrence pattern of rhetorical strategies in the postings.

The eleven original post entries are grouped into five categories: breaking news, gender issue, issues of intellectual property and copyright, science and popular science, and long posts (See Table 4.13). The first four categories are based on the themes of posts, and the fifth category reflects the delivery form.

Table 4.13 Grouping result

Post entry	Topic	Posted by (Author)	Genre and delivery form	Comments
Breaking news				
1	The missing flight MH370	CCTV News	News report; written text	1,303
2	Reckless driving and female drivers	SINA News	News report; written text, hyperlinks, video, and images	11,459
11	Lian Yun Gang Incident	Verified local media account	Repost; written text and images	606
Gender issue				
2	Reckless driving and female drivers	SINA News	News report; written text, hyperlinks, video, and images	11,459
7	Female Ph.D. in archeology and marriage	Weibo User P	Weibo post; written text	4,689
Intellectual Property/Copy right				
3	iPhone lost a lawsuit of intellectual property in China	People's Daily	News report; hyperlinks, written text and images	3,177
4	Intellectual property day	People's Daily	Public campaign; written text and images	277
5	Accusation made by Huo Zai Lun Dun	Independent blogger *Huo Zai Lun Dun*	Accusation; written text and images	869
6	Lu Hun Rong's response to Huo Zai Lun Dun	Independent blogger *Lu Hun Rong* (a scholar)	Response to an accusation; written text and images	71
Science/Popular science				
9	A translated version of String Theory	Independent Blogger 3	Popular science; blog post that contains an animation video and written texts	1,218
10	Nuclear fuel cycling	Independent Blogger 4	Popular science; blog post consisting of written text and images	1,246
11	Lian Yun Gang Incident	Verified local media account	Repost; written text and images	606
Long original post				
8	The rise and fall of Tibetan mastiff industry	Sanlian Life Weekly	Long report (over 3,000 words); written text and hyperlinks	401
10	Nuclear fuel cycling	Independent Blogger 4	Popular science; blog post consisting of written text and images	1,246

4.2.1 Rhetorical strategies in comments responding to breaking news

Table 4.14 Rhetorical strategies in comments responding to breaking news

Post entry		1	2	11
Topic		The missing flight MH370	Reckless driving and female drivers	Lian Yun Gang Incident
Comments		1303	11459	606
1. to argue/comment	Di	62.70%	70.38%	79.21%
	In	12.20%	9.54%	12.21%
2. long postings	Di	0.92%	0.90%	0.66%
	In	1.61%	1.44%	0.17%
3. to compare	Di	28.01%	6.90%	13.20%
	In	1.23%	2.69%	0.83%
4. to request	Di	5.91%	1.66%	6.60%
	In	1.15%	0.20%	2.15%
5. to inform	Di	2.07%	0.80%	0.66%
	In	0.38%	0.12%	0.17%
6. to criticize	Di	6.06%	21.13%	34.82%
	In	4.68%	5.93%	10.73%
7. to quote	Di	19.80%	1.08%	1.82%
	In	0	0.17%	1.16%
8. pressed opinion	Di	0	0.07%	0
	In	0	0.03%	0
9. to correct	Di	0.46%	0.13%	1.16%
	In	0.31%	0.01%	0.33%
10. miscellaneous		3.22%	3.09%	4.79%

Three post entries are grouped together as they are all breaking news. Post entry #1 is a news report about the Chinese government's decision to change the orbits of 10 satellites to provide assistance for the search of the missing flight MH370. Post entry #2 is a news report on a street quarrel involving physical violence triggered by reckless driving. Post entry #11 is a post covering the outbreak and progress of a local protest that takes place the prior night against the plan to build a nuclear recycling plant. Situated in fundamentally different contexts and rhetorical situations, these three posts target at diverse groups of readers and have demonstrated varied dynamics in the comments, which could be examined through the use of rhetorical strategies.

As Table 4.14 shows, the percentages of rhetorical strategies generally follow a similar pattern. Strategy #1 "to argue or to comment" is the most used one; strategy # 9 "to correct" and

strategy #8 “when pressed for an opinion” are the two least used ones. This result suggests that while responding to breaking news, users are mostly likely to argue or to leave their comments and opinions and least likely to engage in context-based communication such as correcting mistakes made by other users or expressing one’s opinions when others press. Given the interactive nature of strategy #8 and #9, the low percentages also indicate a low level of interactive communication among the users who respond to the original posts. Among all the postings, directness surpasses indirectness by a large margin, especially in the most frequently used strategy #1 “to comment/argue.”

Recognizing the general pattern, I need to note a few variations as well. The first variation is located in strategy #2 “long postings.” When users respond with long postings, there is an equal chance of them to use either direct approach or indirect approach according to the results based on the whole sample of 25,316 (see Table 4.2). As in the case of breaking news, post entry #1 and #2 show a preference of indirectness as postings following a non-linear sequence surpass directness (see Table 4.14). Interestingly, post entry #11 *Lian Yun Gang incident* shows a preference of directness as 0.66% of its comments apply directness whereas only 0.17% of its comments use indirectness (see Table 4.14). A second variation is located in strategy #6 “to criticize.” As Table 4.14 shows, postings in the *reckless driving* case and *Lian Yun Gang incident* case have much higher percentages of criticizing strategy compared to the MH370 case. Moreover, as discussed earlier, the use of strategy #5 “to inform” and strategy #6 “to criticize” have a negative correlation, this correlation is relatively weak in the MH370 case whereas both the *reckless driving* case and *Lian Yun Gang incident* case show strong correlation. One possible cause is that the content of the original post, the Chinese government’s decision to adjust satellite orbit to assist the search for MH370, has won approval from the users which

subsequently lead to a low percentage of criticizing strategy. This finding demonstrate that the use of rhetorical strategy is closely associated with the context, the dynamic, and the concurrent sentiment.,

4.2.2 Rhetorical strategies in comments responding to gender issues

Table 4.15 Rhetorical strategies in comments responding to gender issues

Post entry		2	7	
Topic		Reckless driving and female drivers	Female Ph.D. in archeology and marriage	Average of 11 cases
Comments		11459	4689	
1. to argue/comment	Di	70.38%	72.28%	67.43%
	In	9.54%	14.80%	11.48%
2. long postings	Di	0.90%	0.83%	1.48%
	In	1.44%	0.55%	1.24%
3. to compare	Di	6.90%	15.10%	8.58%
	In	2.69%	0.06%	1.50%
4. to request	Di	1.66%	4.12%	3.48%
	In	0.20%	0.85%	0.76%
5. to inform	Di	0.80%	0.06%	1.26%
	In	0.12%	0.02%	0.31%
6. to criticize	Di	21.13%	22.46%	17.07%
	In	5.93%	9.17%	5.68%
7. to quote	Di	1.08%	5.37%	3.15%
	In	0.17%	1.17%	0.49%
8. pressed opinion	Di	0.07%	0.36%	0.30%
	In	0.03%	0	0.05%
9. to correct	Di	0.13%	0.19%	0.76%
	In	0.01%	0.02%	0.13%
10. miscellaneous		3.09%	6.38%	5.94%

Two post entries are grouped together as they are all breaking news. Post entry #2 is a news report on a street quarrel involving physical violence against a woman. In this incident, the man is furious at the woman as he feels his safety as well as his onboard child's safety is threatened by the woman's reckless driving, and he drags the woman out of her car and beats her. After the video clip displaying the scene is posted, the incident draws attention nationwide overnight and brings about huge numbers of comments, among which many users associate bad

driving behaviors with female drivers thus cause a heated debate about gender and driving behavior. Post entry #7 is written by an ordinary user who briefly describes the matchmaking and dating experience of his/her high school classmate. This classmate is a girl, and she earns her doctoral degree in archelogy from China's top university. Although she is well-educated and has a pretty decent job at Shanghai Museum, her dating experience seems quite unlucky as most of the guys turn her down as soon as they hear the words like *female Ph.D.* and *archeology*. Posted by an ordinary user who only has less than 2,000 follows, this post receives 4,730 comments and over 10,000 retweets.

Overall the distribution of the use of rhetorical strategies, which is reflected on the percentages in Table 4.15, follows the average pattern of the whole body of selected posting. Users frequently argue or comment, and they also criticize quite often. Complex rhetorical situations such as being pressed with opinions or dealing with mistakes about factual information are rare in communication, and users tend to respond with direct approaches.

Four variations to the general patterns should be discussed here. The first one is a preference of indirectness over directness in the use of strategy #2 in the case of post entry #2 *female driver and reckless driving*. As Table 4.15 shows, in the comments responding to post #2, only 0.90% follow a direct approach while 1.44% of the comments employ an indirect, non-linear structure. This finding not only differs from the general pattern, but also deviates from the common perception that emotion is irrational. This finding is quite surprising because of the sentiment expressed in the comments. Our original assumption was that emotion would translate into more direct rhetorical strategies, but our analysis did not yield any significant evidence to confirm such an assumption. The second variation happens in strategy #3 "to compare" in the case of post entry #7 *female Ph.D. and marriage*. Compared with the average percentage and the

one in post entry #2, the use of direct naming while comparing opinions is much higher than average. This finding suggests that readers of post entry #7 tend to compare opinions, which might indicate a high degree of participation in the conversation as they are actively noticing, comparing, and arguing with other users. A third noticeable feature lies in the use of criticizing strategy as post entry #2 has 21.13% and post entry #7 has 22.46% of the comments expressing criticism, both of which are much higher than the average of 17.07%. This finding indicates a very harsh critical sentiment about gender issues among Weibo users. The fourth variation is about the use of quoting strategy. Post entry #2 and #7 have different percentages of quoting, the former being lower than the average percentage and the latter showing a higher percentage. Similar to strategy #3 "to compare," the high percentage of quoting strategy might indicate a high degree of participation in online discussion. Therefore, the results support the claim that users responding to the *female Ph.D. and marriage* cases are more engaged in the conversation.

The two post entries have stirred strong reaction from readers who either sided with men or women despite their opinions on other aspects of the two posts. The gender ratio of the users is unknown in this case, but at least based on the analysis, users display a critical, tough, and even assertive tone, which might be called "masculine" according to Hofstede (2010).

4.2.3 Rhetorical strategies in comments responding to issues of intellectual property and copy right

Table 4.16 Rhetorical strategies in comments responding to issues of intellectual property and copyright

Post entry		3	4	5	6	
Topic		iPhone lost a lawsuit of intellectual property in China	Intellectual property day	Accusation made by Huo Zai Lun Dun	Lu Hun Rong's response to Huo Zai Lun Dun	Average of 11 cases
Comments		3177	277	869	71	
1. to argue/comment	Di	85.02%	45.49%	31.99%	28.17%	67.43%
	In	3.68%	13.36%	18.41%	28.17%	11.48%
2. long postings	Di	0.44%	3.25%	4.03%	5.63%	1.48%
	In	0.28%	0.72%	6.44%	5.63%	1.24%
3. to compare	Di	1.35%	2.17%	13.00%	8.45%	8.58%
	In	0.28%	0.72%	1.96%	2.82%	1.50%
4. to request	Di	1.76%	13.36%	6.21%	9.86%	3.48%
	In	0.09%	2.53%	4.14%	7.04%	0.76%
5. to inform	Di	2.93%	2.17%	2.76%	2.82%	1.26%
	In	1.35%	0	0.58%	0	0.31%
6. to criticize	Di	5.35%	9.03%	12.66%	9.86%	17.07%
	In	1.76%	2.17%	9.55%	8.45%	5.68%
7. to quote	Di	0.22%	1.44%	4.03%	8.45%	3.15%
	In	0.09%	0	0.92%	0	0.49%
8. pressed opinion	Di	0	0	3.80%	11.27%	0.30%
	In	0	0	0.81%	2.82%	0.05%
9. to correct	Di	2.61%	1.44%	2.30%	12.68%	0.76%
	In	0.09%	0	1.27%	0	0.13%
10. miscellaneous		8.09%	19.86%	5.29%	2.82%	5.94%

Aa Table 4.16 shows, four posts are grouped together according to a shared theme - intellectual property and copy right. Post entry #3 is a news report about a lawsuit against iPhone. Apple was accused of copying the design of a Chinese local brand thus violating the intellectual property law in China. The U.S. tech giant lost the case. Post entry 5 and 6 are closely related as the author of entry 5 Huo Zai Lun Dun publicly accuses the author of entry 6 Lu Hun Rong of copying content without acknowledgement and the latter responding to the accusation. The author of post entry #5 is an independent blogger *Huo Zai Lun Dun* based in London who posts original content about culture and arts, and the author of post entry #6 is named *Lu Hun Rong*, who is also an independent blogger and dedicates to openly sharing

academic resources especially those about culture, art, history, and philosophy. Although never officially confirmed, the identity of *Lu Hun Rong* is believed to be a college professor based in the Netherlands. The dispute is started by *Huo Zai Lun Dun* as he/she posted a 6,000 -word post with multiple images accusing *Lu Hun Rong* of copying content without acknowledgement. Got tagged in the accusation post, the independent blogger Lu Hun Rong retweets and asks users for opinions.

Overall users still prefer strategy #1 "argue or comment" the most, but this group shows the most variations compared with the average percentage. The first noticeable deviation is post entry #3 iPhone lawsuit. This case shows an extremely skewed distribution of strategies among the comments as 85.02% of comments use direct arguing/commenting strategies, and it also shows a quite low percentage of critiquing strategy (5.35% for direct criticizing and 1.76% for indirect criticizing) comparing to the average number and the percentages of the other three posts in this group. In addition, the uncategorizable posting reflected in #10 "miscellaneous" is also much higher than the average, which is caused by a large number of emoji postings and retweets without any content. These features suggest that a considerable portion of postings might be caused by a strong sentiment against iPhone's previous endeavors to sue Chinese brands for copying its design and technologies. Sharing a strong sentiment combined with a sense of patriotism, users' responses demonstrate a pattern of being overly direct and monotonous. A second variation is post entry #6 *Lu Hun Rong*. As Table 4.16 shows, post entry #4 *World Intellectual Property Day*, #5 *Huo Zai Lun Dun,* and #6 *Lu Hun Rong* have low percentages of strategy #1 "to argue or to comment," however, all of the indirectness percentages are higher than the average. What is especially noticeable is that users in post entry #6 *Lu Hun Rong* do not show a preference toward directness or indirect as both approaches have the percentage of

28.17%, which is quite low for direct arguing/comment but relatively high for indirect arguing/commenting. In addition to the feature reflected in strategy #1, post entry #6 *Lu Hun Rong* also shows higher percentages on strategies that require higher leverl of participation, such as strategy # "to quote", #8 "being pressed to offer opinions", and #9 "to correct." A possible explanation is that a considerable portion of Lu Hun Rong's followers have received academic training or have received higher education, thus they are prone to well-thought, well-organized expression and are more willing to engage deeply in the conversation about intellectual property.

It is also interesting to note the different preferences for directness and indirectness between post entry #6 *Lu Hun Rong* and post entry #7 *female Ph.D. and marriage.* Users of both post entries are very engaged as both posts show high level of participation through strategy #7, #8, and #9. However, due to the academic background of its users, Lu Hun Rong's post receives responses that shows more indirectness.

4.2.4 Rhetorical strategies in comments responding to posts of science and popular science: directness and stakeholders

Table 4.17 Rhetorical strategies in comments responding to science and popular science

Post entry		9	10	11	
Topic		A translated version of String Theory	Nuclear fuel cycling	Lian Yun Gang Incident	Average of 11 cases
Comments		1218	1246	606	
1. to argue/comment	Di	31.94%	47.83%	79.21%	67.43%
	In	39.90%	3.45%	12.21%	11.48%
2. long postings	Di	1.64%	10.59%	0.66%	1.48%
	In	0.49%	1.85%	0.17%	1.24%
3. to compare	Di	2.79%	1.77%	13.20%	8.58%
	In	0.16%	1.12%	0.83%	1.50%
4. to request	Di	8.13%	8.27%	6.60%	3.48%
	In	1.56%	2.25%	2.15%	0.76%
5. to inform	Di	0	4.41%	0.66%	1.26%
	In	0.00%	0.72%	0.17%	0.31%
6. to criticize	Di	1.23%	16.05%	34.82%	17.07%
	In	0.25%	3.21%	10.73%	5.68%
7. to quote	Di	1.31%	4.90%	1.82%	3.15%
	In	1.64%	1.04%	1.16%	0.49%
8. pressed opinion	Di	0	0.72%	0	0.30%
	In	0	0	0	0.05%
9. to correct	Di	0.08%	2.81%	1.16%	0.76%
	In	0	0.80%	0.33%	0.13%
10. miscellaneous		21.43%	4.90%	4.79%	5.94%

A total of three post entries are grouped together as they all cover the subject of science and popular science. Post entry #9 *string theory* contains a ten-minute video explaining the basic concepts in string theory. Post entry #10 is an article introducing the recycling of nuclear fuel. Post entry #11 is a post reporting on the outbreak and process of a local protest against the plan of building a nuclear fuel factory in the city. Post entry #10 comes three days after post #11 so it can be regarded as a response to the protest and a heated sentiment against nuclear energy. One of the key points in post entry #10 is that nuclear fuel and its effect on the environment had been demonized, and the Chinese translation of the name 核废料 nuclear waste is not only inaccurate, but also misleading and deceptive. The author points out that the accurate term in this

case should be “乏燃料”, or “spent nuclear fuel,” which has a less negative and sensational connotation.

In this group every post shows various patterns of rhetorical strategies. First, post entry #9 string theory and post entry #10 have quite low percentages of strategy 1 “to argue/comment” compared with post entry #11. Since the subjects of post entry #9 and #10 are very specific and academic, only readers with certain domain knowledge will be able to comment on or argue about the topic, thus it can explain why strategy #1 is not frequently used among the readers of these two posts.

The second noticeable feature is a contradiction in post entries #9 and #10, both of which discuss science topics. As Table 4.17 shows, post entry # 10 *nuclear recycling* low in indirectness in “to argue or comment” and relatively high in criticizing strategy, and post #9 is the opposite high percentage of indirectness in arguing but low level of criticizing. Given the similar nature of these two posts, it can be inferred that both *string theory* post and *nuclear recycling* attract a body of readers who have the domain specific knowledge to engage oneself in online communication. So how can we interpret the contradiction in indirect arguing strategy and criticizing strategy? By taking a close look at the percentage numbers of another post entry in this group, we can find that users in post entry #11 *Lian Yun Gang* are significantly more critical than others (See Table 4.17).

A possible explanation might be the user’s stake in the topic and the kairotic moment at the time of the posts. Readers and users of post entry #11 *Lian Yun Gang* has the highest stake comparing to the other two posts. Since the author of post entry #11 is a local account, the post mainly circulated among local communities. The heated reaction and strong, negative sentiment reflect a sense of insecurity and exigency as the locals feel their safety and lives are been

threatened by the nuclear plant. The post entry # 10, though also about nuclear fuel cycling, holds a body of users who are less attached to the topic. As a timely response to the Lian Yun Gang incident, post entry #10 approaches the topic of nuclear recycling from a scientific perspective with a professional, academic, and calm tone. Its users do not belong to a specific local community, and they might not feel as insecure as the users in post entry #11. For readers of post #9 *String theory*, their attachment to the topic is the lowest among the three posts because string theory is not connected with any real-life incident at the time of the post, so the context is quite low-stake.

This finding in the group suggests that when science is associated with a specific case, users are very likely to become stakeholders, thus cannot remain detached. The higher the stake, the more direct and critical users will be.

A third feature is the extremely high percentage of "miscellaneous" demonstrated in case #9. A further analysis shows that a large portion of "Miscellaneous" postings are simply retweeting without any information added. The action of retweeting does help with information dissemination, but its contribution to directly engaging social media users in conversation should not be overstated.

4.2.5 Rhetorical strategies in comments responding to long posts: the challenge of user engagement

Table 4.18 Rhetorical strategies in comments responding to long posts

Post entry		8	10	
Topic		The rise and fall of Tibetan mastiff industry	Nuclear fuel cycling	Average of 11 cases
Comments		401	1246	
1. to argue/comment	Di	52.37%	47.83%	67.43%
	In	5.99%	3.45%	11.48%
2. long postings	Di	0.75%	10.59%	1.48%
	In	0.50%	1.85%	1.24%
3. to compare	Di	1.00%	1.77%	8.58%
	In	0.25%	1.12%	1.50%
4. to request	Di	6.48%	8.27%	3.48%
	In	0.75%	2.25%	0.76%
5. to inform	Di	3.49%	4.41%	1.26%
	In	0	0.72%	0.31%
6. to criticize	Di	7.73%	16.05%	17.07%
	In	2.00%	3.21%	5.68%
7. to quote	Di	5.99%	4.90%	3.15%
	In	0	1.04%	0.49%
8. pressed opinion	Di	0	0.72%	0.30%
	In	0	0	0.05%
9. to correct	Di	0.75%	2.81%	0.76%
	In	0	0.80%	0.13%
10. miscellaneous		24.19%	4.90%	5.94%

Post entry #8 Tibetan mastiff and post entry #10 are grouped together as both contain a very long text. The *Tibetan mastiff* piece is a magazine article that can be accessed through a hyperlink in the original post. The magazine, *San Lian Life Weekly*, is one of the best-selling magazines in China, which is also renowned for its high-quality coverage on contemporary topics both domestic ones and oversea issues. *San Lian Life Weekly* is widely recognized as the top magazine in the area of sociocultural reports. Post entry # 10 nuclear recycling published in the form of long post, a special function designed by Weibo to meet users' need for a platform of longer and richer content.

The overall pattern in this group slightly deviates from the average. This group shows a less preferred tendency to "argue or comment" as well as to compare opinions, but the group also shows a more preferred tendency to use requesting strategy.

The variances inside the group are also noticeable. The first intra-group disagreement is the use of strategy 2 long posting. As Table 4.18 shows, post entry #10 *nuclear recycling* has a much higher percentage of long postings than post entry # 8 *Tibetan mastiff*. Another disagreement within the group lies in the unidentifiable response reflected in category "miscellaneous." As Table 4.18 shows, the post entry *Tibetan mastiff* has 24.19% of its responding postings categorized as unidentifiable, which is significantly higher than post #10 *nuclear fuel cycling*. A further analysis reveals that many users retweet the post without leaving any comments. The reasons that lead to this action might be complex, but at least the retweeting action suggests it can serve the purpose of disseminating information, an important role Weibo has played in many social movement (Deluca, Brynner, & Sun, 2016, Poell, De Kloet, & Zeng, 2014, Sima 2011).

4.3 How the use of directness changes over time in one post: A longitudinal perspective

So far in this study, I have analyzed how each rhetorical strategy has been employed by users to achieve various purposes in different contexts. However, communication on social media also has a longitudinal dimension, which has not been discussed in this paper. Some questions remain unexplored: when does an original post receive the most attention from users? Do users' choices of rhetorical strategies change over time? At what point of time do users prefer directness or indirectness? These questions are especially prominent in the case of breaking news because the large number of responses clearly demonstrate how the trends of rhetorical strategy use change over time.

In this section, I will focus on the case of post entry #2 *reckless driving and female driver*.

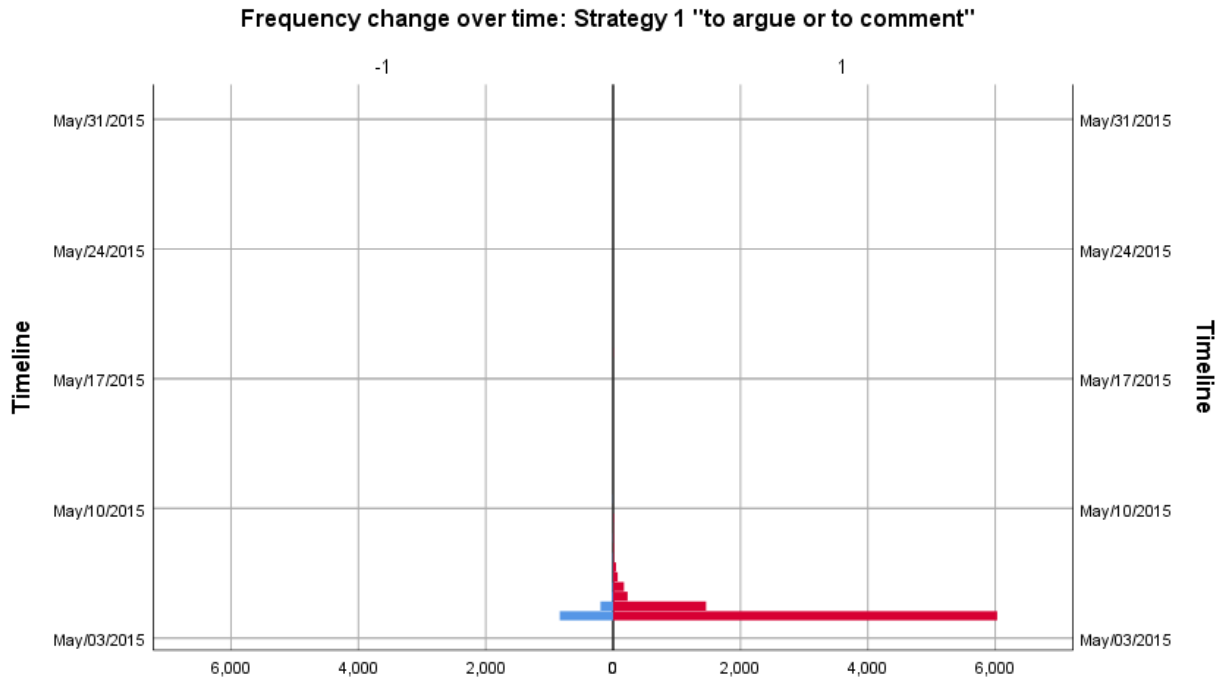

Figure 4.1 Frequency change over time in strategy 1
Note: "1" represents directness and "-1" represents indirectness.

According to the analysis, the original post is published at 22:30, May 3, 2015, and it receives the first comment at 22:31, May 3, 2015. The last comment is posted at 1:48, May 30, 2015. The comments in this case cover a time span of 27 days. As Figure 4.1 shows, a vast majority of comments emerge in the first a few hours of the publishing time. The distribution data is extremely skewed, so I have "zoomed in" to take a close look at the pattern of first 3 days as well as the first 48 hours.

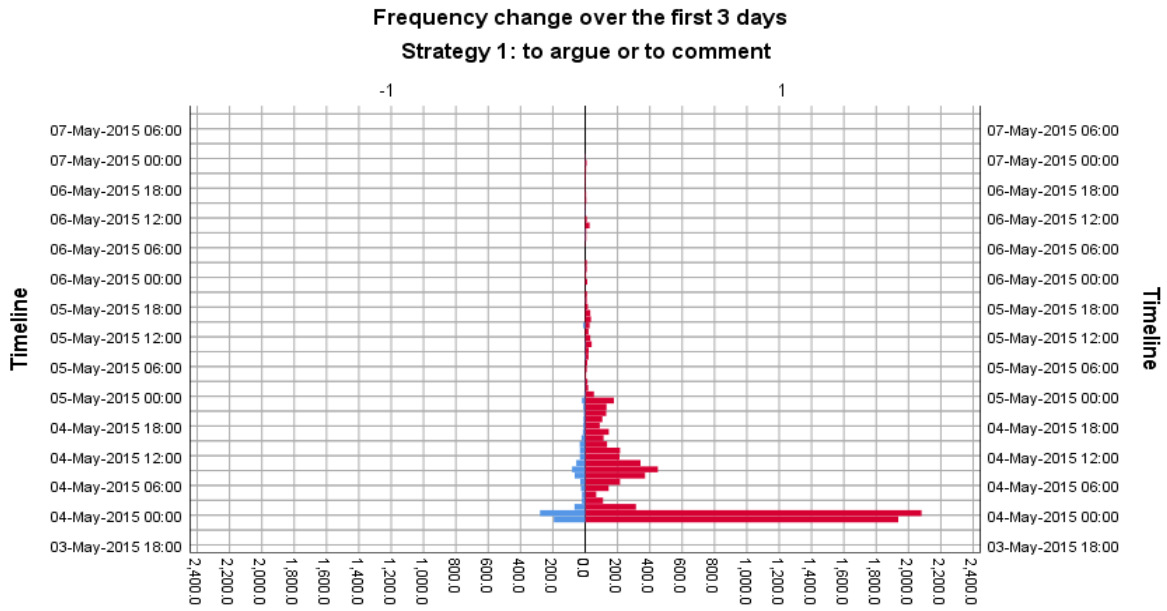

Figure 4.2 Frequency change over the first 3 days in strategy 1
Note: "1" represents directness and "-1" represents indirectness.

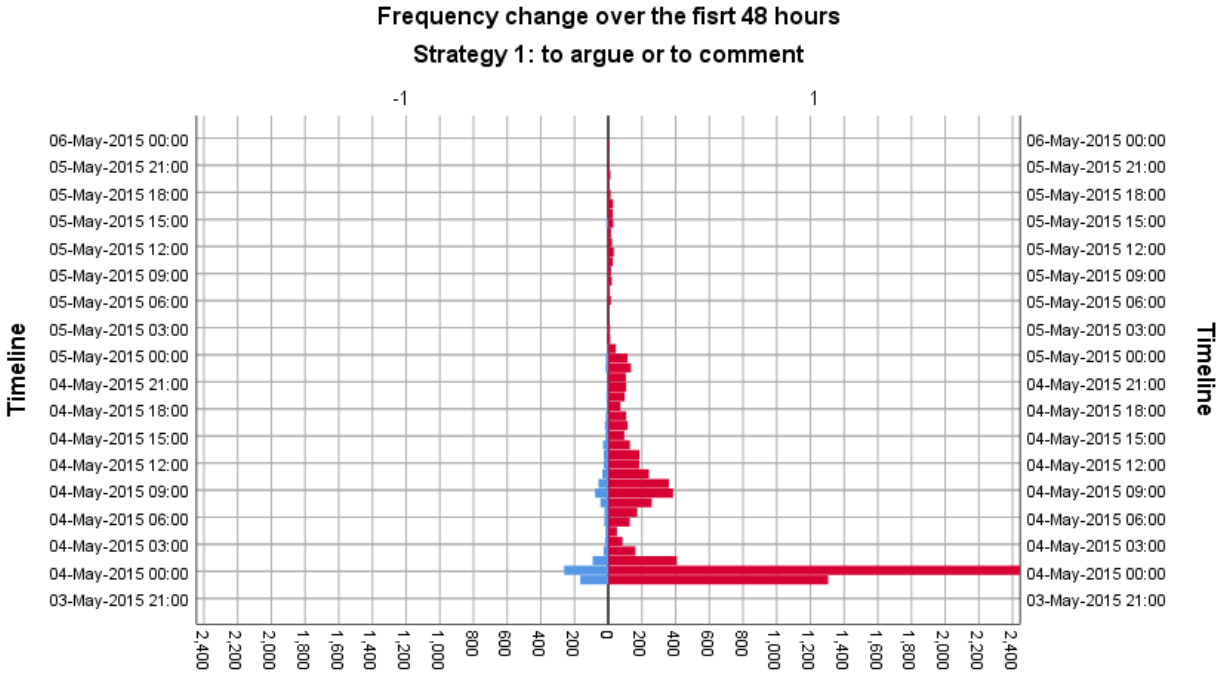

Figure 4.3 Frequency change over the first 48 hours in strategy 1
Note: "1" represents directness and "-1" represents indirectness.

As Figure 4.2 and Figure 4.3 show, the original post receives almost 1,400 direct comments/arguments and around 200 indirect comments/arguments in the first hour. When it comes to the second hour, both the direct approach and the indirect approach reach their peak, hitting 2,400 for directness and 300 for indirectness. The second peak hour comes at nine hours after the original posting time, which coincidently is 9 a.m. the next day, a moment when many Weibo users start their new day. As the timeline goes further, both directness and indirectness decrease, but directness remains at around 100 postings each hour.

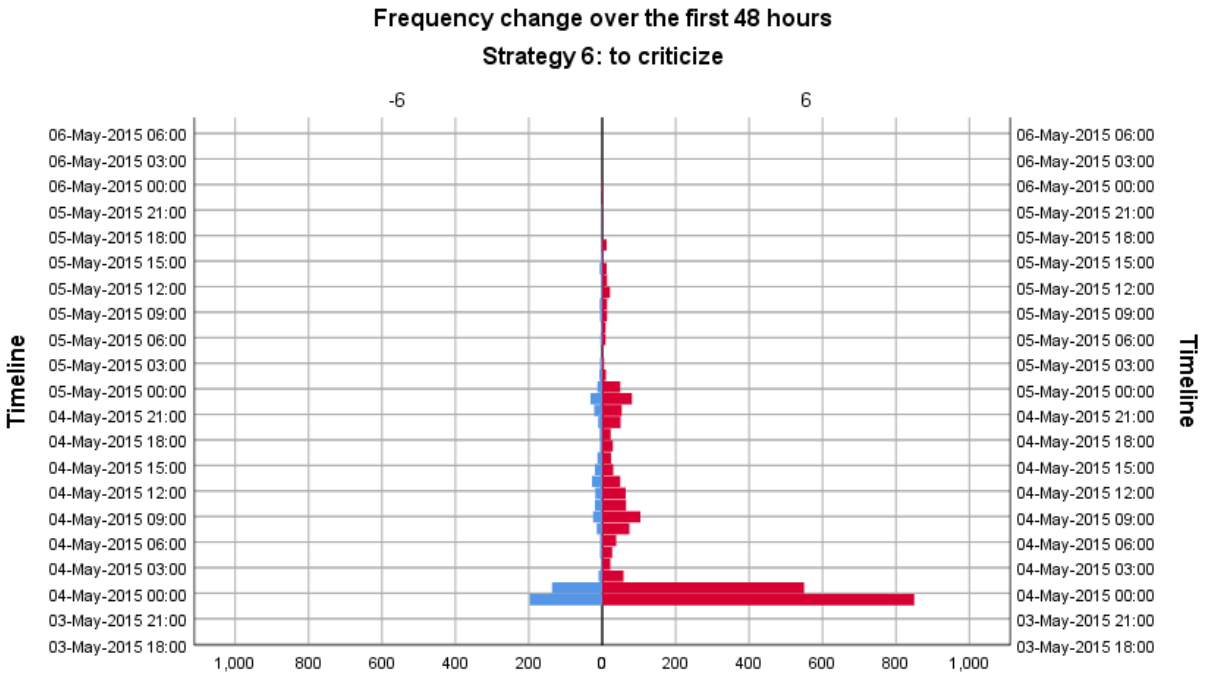

Figure 4.4 Frequency change over the first 48 hours in strategy 6
Note: "6" represents directness and "-6" represents indirectness.

The development of strategy #6 "to criticize" is similar to that of strategy 1. The most noticeable difference is that the peak of posting number comes at the first hour. In this case, if we regard the use of criticizing strategy as an indicator of online sentiment, then users' reaction to this incident instantly reaches its peak regardless of how late the posting time is. The second

peak hour comes at 9 am the next morning, but the frequencies of both directness and indirectness are much lower than the first peak.

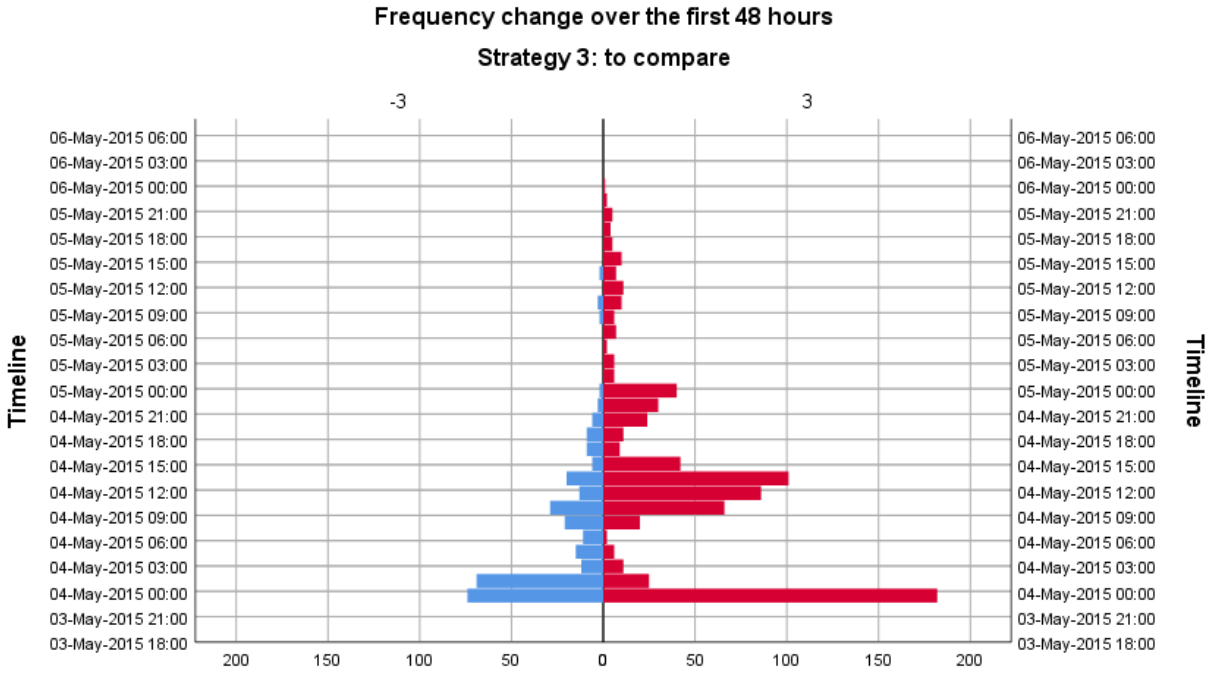

Figure 4.5 Frequency change over the first 48 hours in strategy 3
Note: "3" represents directness and "-3" represents indirectness.

The development of strategy 3 "to compare" is quite unique among the ten categories. Its distribution follows the general pattern of strategy1 and strategy 6; however, it also shows distinctive features. The peak hour of this strategy comes at the first hour, in which the direct approach direct naming opponents has a very high frequency. When it comes to the second hour, the directness drops drastically while indirectness increases rapidly.

4.4 Authenticity of the postings: any trace of 50 cent party and cheerleading

The Chinese government has long been suspected of imposing extensive controls over social media (Cairns &Carlson, 2016; Knockel et al., 2015; MacKinnon 2012; Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011; Yang, 2009). Numerous sources have accused the government of *reverse censorship (*King et al., 2017*)*, "surreptitiously posting large numbers of fabricated social media

comments as if they were the genuine opinions of ordinary Chinese people." People who are secretly hired to post comments of reverse censorship are called *50 cent party* (五毛党) as one can earn RMB 50 cent for each comment he/she posts. In contrast to this claim, King, Pan, and Robert (2017)'s study reveals that the government's strategy is not to fake opinions; instead they employ a secretive operation to post vast numbers of irrelevant postings to distract Weibo users from discussing sensitive topics. King, Pan, and Robert (2017) finds out that most of these irrelevant postings involve "cheerleading for China, the revolutionary history of the Communist Party, or other symbols of the regime."

Neither 50 cent party or irrelevant postings represent the opinions of ordinary users. In this study, we do detect suspicious postings that do not sound real or authentic to our coders. Here I include one posting that has a tone of 50 cent party and one posting with a cheerleading feature.

In the case of post entry #1 *MH 370*, one user posts a comment responding to the news with a distinctive feature of cheerleading:

Bonjorrr：中国好棒！多一份理解，少一份责备。马航 370 的同胞，国人都在盼着你回来。@央视新闻

Literal translation: Bonjorrr(user name): China is awesome! More understanding, less blame! Our compatriots on MH370, we are looking to your return. @CCTV News

In the case of post entry #11 *Lian Yun Gang incident*, one user posts a comment that has the tone of the 50 cent party:

远不离：游行示威是对的，是好事，作为大连云港人我们有权决定我们的城市如何发展，建设。但在游行示威的时候我们不应该做出袭警，毁坏公工设施等违法行为。

Literal translation: Yuan Bu Li (user name): Street demonstration and protest are right, they are good things. As residents of Greater Lian Yun Gang, we have the right to decide on how our city should develop and construct. But while protesting on the street, we should not do illegal behavior like assaulting the police and vandalizing public infrastructures.

The detection of 50 cent party and irrelevant postings is not a focus of the study; therefore, no criterion is developed to identify these unauthentic postings.

4.5 Conclusion

As for the question "Which strategy is used most frequently," Weibo data show that strategy #1 "to argue or to comment" is the most used rhetorical strategy, and criticizing strategy is the second most used strategy. The least used strategy is #8 "when pressed with an opinion", and the second least used strategy is #9 "to correct factual mistake that one is supposed to know." The result suggests that "to argue or to comment" is the most prominent purpose of Weibo users, and once a topic has close proximity to one's everyday life, it is very likely to generate strong critical reactions among users. In addition, I observe a general negative correlation between the use of strategy #5 "to inform" and strategy #6 "to criticize," which indicates that users are not providing much information while they are posting criticism. An original post that has triggered a large amount of criticism is not very likely to generate information-rich responses.

In most strategies, the use of directness outweighs indirectness. Strategy #2 "long posting" is an exception as the use of directness and the use of indirectness are closely equal. An interesting phenomenon that has been widely observed is the coexistence of directness and indirectness in one single posting, demonstrating how complicated the rhetorical situation can become.

There are also some notable features.-In informing strategies, directness outweighs indirectness in terms of frequency. One possible explanation is the anonymity of online communication makes indirect informing strategies, which in many cases are used to save face and maintain harmony, not necessary. Also, due to the word limit, users will also choose a more "efficient" way to put forward their message. Another noteworthy feature is that the Chinese users tend to quote well-known proverbs, sayings from Chinese classics such as *The Analects, Classic of Poetry,* and *Dao De Jing*

I also group cases that share a similar theme and analyze the occurrence patterns of rhetorical strategies responding to different topics and original posts of different lengths.

This result in the breaking news group suggests that users are most likely to argue or to leave their comments and opinions and least likely to engage in context-based communication such as strategy #9 correcting mistakes made by other users or strategy #8 expressing one's opinions when others press them. Given the interactive nature of strategy #8 and #9, the low percentages also indicate a low level of interactive communication among the users who respond to the original posts. This finding indicates that the use of rhetorical strategies is closely associated with the context, the dynamic, and the concurrent sentiment responding to the content of the original post.

In the group of gender issues, the overall the distribution of the use of rhetorical strategies follows the average pattern of the whole body of selected posting. Users frequently argue or comment, and they also criticize quite often. Complex rhetorical situations such as being pressed with opinions or dealing with mistakes about factual information are rare in communication, and users tend to respond with direct approaches. The data also demonstrates a very harsh, critical sentiment about gender issues among Weibo users. The gender ratio of users is unidentifiable,

but at least based on the analysis users display a critical, tough even assertive tone, which Hofstede might call “masculine.” This *female Ph.D. and marriage* post entry also shows a high percentage of quoting strategy and comparing strategy might indicate a high degree of participation in online discussion as users are actively noticing, comparing, and arguing with other users. Therefore, the results support the claim that users responding to the *female Ph.D. and marriage* cases are more engaged in the conversation.

In the group of intellectual property and copy right, users still prefer strategy #1 “argue or comment” the most. The *iPhone lawsuit* case demonstrates a pattern of being overly direct and monotonous, which might be caused by a strong sentiment combined with a sense of patriotism. A noticeable phenomenon is that users of academic background are prone to indirect, well-thought, well-organized expression and are more likely to engage themselves in the conversation about intellectual property and copy right.

In the group of science and popular science, the posts, which require specific domain knowledge to understand, show a low frequency of strategy #1 “to comment or to argue” indicating that many users are not able to comment. When science is associated with a specific case, users who are stakeholders in the case will be highly engaged thus cannot remain detached. The higher the stake, the more direct and critical users will be.

The overall pattern in the group of long posts slightly deviates from the average. This group shows a less preferred tendency to “argue or comment as well as to compare opinions, but the group also shows a preference for the requesting strategy. The magazine article Tibetan mastiff receives many retweeting without leaving any comments, an action suggests that it can serve the purpose of disseminating information but lacks user engagement.

The longitudinal analysis shows that in one of the breaking news cases, the *reckless driving and female drivers*, both of the most used strategies #1 "to comment or to argue" and #6 "to criticize" share a similar pattern of occurrence on a longitudinal scale. The original post sees 18% of commenting or criticizing in the first hour, and the peak hour comes at the second hour when almost 40% of the posts are published. The second peak hour comes nine hours after the original posting time, which coincidently is 9 a.m. the next day a moment when many Weibo users begin a new day. As the timeline goes further, both directness and indirectness decrease, but directness remains in higher number than indirectness in every period. The result shows that the first two hours get the most attention, and the peak hour also coincide with users' daily routine. Directness overall remain higher in number than indirectness in each time period.

5 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In the previous chapters, I have 1) explained the methodology, 2) provided evidences of reliability in coding; 3) and analyzed the data and discover an overall preference of directness in rhetorical strategies. In this chapter, I propose to rethink the notion of "directness" in the Chinese context and discuss Weibo's influence on the Chinese society through the lens of rhetorical strategy use.

5.1 Rethinking "directness" and "indirectness" in online context: an emic perspective

The empirical research methodology in this study represents an etic approach that is based on a comparative, intercultural perspective. The categorization criteria and the coding method are developed on observation, research, and theories conducted by scholars of intercultural communication. Research results based on comparison of different cultures surely have merits. For example, Heine et al (2002) propose the notion of "reference group effect" to support the validity of comparative approaches. In their study that consists of three carefully

designed experiments, they argue that the common view of East Asians scoring higher than North Americans on scales relating to collectivism are valid because while evaluating cultural differences, people are referencing others, consciously or unconsciously, as a result of interpersonal contact and communication. Thus, cross-culture researchers, who by a large portion have led bicultural lives, are in a position to become more sensitive to cultural difference, whereas individuals who experience much more contact with others within the same cultures tend to emphasize personal introspection and comparison within internal standards.

While the comparative approach does provide insight into unique feature of each culture and rhetoric, Thatcher (2012) points out an inherent defect of the etic approach, which is that the research result is not culturally specific. Hamaguchi Esyun, the renowned scholar of Japanese studies, holds a similar critique to Japanese studies in the West. He argues that the weakness of many Japanese studies lies in the analytical paradigms that are not necessarily based on "emics inherent to Japan's culture" (Esyun, Shumpei, & Creighton, 1985). Esyun, Shumpei, & Creighton (1985) criticizes the use of etic–or outsider's–perspective for it fails to sustain an insider's advantage in understanding the culture and society.

To overcome the defect brought up by the etic approach and to understand and reconcile rhetoric across cultures, Thatcher (2012) advocates an "eticthen-emic" frame that sheds light on both the universal traits and culturally specific characterizes of communication.

The empirical study of this paper, the result of which has been carefully analyzed in Chapter 4, represents an etic approach aiming at exploring rhetorical patterns based on universal rules. In this chapter, I will adopt an emic approach by positing rhetorical strategies in contemporary Chinese culture and society.

5.1.1 The overlook of the so-called "rhetorical tradition" in China

Oliver (1971)'s claim that Chinese rhetoric lacks the history/tradition of public debating oration has been shadowing our view of contemporary Chinese rhetoric. Despite the fact that ancient China does hold a tradition of persuasion and debate (Lu, 1998), the rhetor, in a broad sense, has changed throughout history. In ancient China, which was a hierarchical society, only speeches of the important people, such as the emperors, high level bureaucrats, scholars, were recorded. The voices of the masses, ordinary people are missing in official records. But these missing voices has emerged in the age of digital communication as a great many of the ordinary people can express their opinions through the Internet. Nonetheless, I need to note that though the public voice has been heard better than any period in history, the rhetorical modes imbedded in the online communication reflect an informal style, which is quite different from the formal, written tradition of Chinese texts.

Another prevailing perception about Chinese rhetoric is the lack of deductive reasoning process in argument (Jensen 1992). Kroll (1985) categorizes argumentation and persuasion in ancient Chinese into several types such as "inference by analogy," "thesis and antithesis," "comparing things and joining objects of the same kind," which Kroll would call indirect argumentation and persuasion. However, Kroll's argument is based on the analysis of imperial diplomatic practices during the Warring States period, thus it understated contemporary Chinese rhetoric in online communication.

One spot-on critique of this line of Western scholars' research on Chinese rhetoric is the focus "[that] is placed on specific modes of argumentation rather than providing cultural and textual analysis for the engagement of such mode." (Lu, 1998, p.28) As a result of this decontextualized analysis of Chinese rhetoric, especially with regards to ancient Chinese

rhetoric, the understanding of Chinese rhetoric has So as an attempt to explore Chinese rhetoric in its context especially with regards to cultural and social factors, my study places the emphasis on connecting the use of rhetorical strategies, including argumentation skills and many more, with the specific situation.

The current findings discussed in Chapter 4 have demonstrated that the use of rhetorical strategy and the preference for direct or indirect approach are associated with the topic, the author, the composition of readers/user, the required domain knowledge, the delivery form, and the responding time, or as Lu (1998) calls it, ”the discrete aspects to other related elements.”

5.1.2 Communication media and rhetorical pattern: Weibo's influence of word limit and anonymity

In this section I will discuss how Weibo as a digital communication form has influenced rhetorical patterns employed by its Chinese users. The analysis will focus on two technical features: the 140-word limit and the anonymity.

Weibo imposes a word limit of 140 words, or to be more specific, a 140Chinesecharacter limit. Weibo never reveals the reason for choosing 140 as the cap, although many scholars and observers suspect the number 140 is borrowed from Twitter's 140-character limit (Sun, 2013).

The impact of word limit on rhetorical strategy on Weibo is seen on the highly homogeneity of rhetorical strategy use and an overly large proportion of directness as is analyzed in Chapter 4.

Kock (2005)' s media naturalness theory might offer an explanation to the association between word limit and the highly homogenous choices of rhetorical strategies. Drawing upon evolutionary psychology, Kock (2005) argues that the default communication that human brains adapt to is face-to-face communication; however, as the technological advancements of digital

communication surpass the ability that human brain could adapt to new technology, cognitive obstacles will emerge. In the case of Weibo communication, as a result of the rich media that Weibo can provide, such as hyperlinks, images, texts, emojis, videos, and long postings, information overload occurs, which eventually leads to cognitive obstacles. I want to argue that the more information overload is created, the less effort users will take on planning rhetorical strategies. This tendency can be observed on strategies that require more thoughts and planning to address the hidden code, such as inter-personal relationship imbedded in the context. Such strategies include request strategy, quoting, comparing, facing with pressed opinion, and correcting strategy.

Another noticeable feature of Weibo communication is the anonymity of users. Weibo has adopted an identity system that is very similar to Twitter and Facebook: any individual or organization can choose to have a user's name as the ID, but they can also choose to be presented as a verified user as long as they pass Weibo's verification process which always requires authentic documents such as ID card and employment letter. Anonymity can be used as a means of protection of privacy. For example, many social activists particularly seek anonymity on social media to protect themselves from retaliation (Viégas, 2005). For ordinary users, the anonymity policy not only covers their names, occupations, employment, and social status, but also frees them from the power dynamics they are experiencing in real life. Anonymity eradicates the power hierarchy and sense of accountability and renders communication more direct and straightforward. As is shown in the research results in Chapter 4, Weibo users' responses to breaking news are overly direct, critical, and sometimes involves in the use of profanity. Moreover, a heated sentiment, such as the bullying, trolling, hate speech, and

misogyny speech in the *reckless driving* post, also reveals the highly irrational side of user-generated content.

To seek an explanation to the seemingly association between anonymity and users' rhetorical pattern, especially with regards to the irrationality and unethical speech in the postings, I want to apply deindividuation theory. Deindividuation theory suggests that people in crowds would behave antisocially because in such an environment, the sense of self and accountability is reduced (Reicher, Spears, & Postmes,1995). Online environment resembles the crowd in the physical world where users are experiencing the similar lack of self-awareness and accountability. This phenomenon is especially visible in the case of breaking news posts, such as the *reckless driving incident* and *Lian Yun Gang incident*. The online communication is strictly monitored in China, but the control is mainly applied to anti-government speech, therefore, the lack of censorship on certain irrational misconduct, such bullying, trolling, and hate speech, makes room for direct expression of opinions without consequences.

Interestingly in posts that deal with serious topics, such as string theory and quantum physics, and Lu Hun Rong's post about copyright, directness is shadowed by indirectness. This is because individual's expression is always situated in the context, more specifically here, in the discourse community. Reicher, Spears, & Postmes (1995) propose that our expression is always symbolic, based on the in-group's norm. As a result of this group bound, individual needs to adjust their speech to fit in the group norm. Apparently, in the group of string theory or Lu Hun Rong's case, the accepted norm is rational expression and sophisticated reasoning, which each user needs to comply with.

5.2 Is Weibo forming a public sphere? Challenge from the low-level user participation

Social media, like Facebook and Twitter, is inarguably a great source of information (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012), but whether or in what ways social media enhances democracy and political movements remains a question (Sustein, 2018). A more specific question is "has new media and social media become a public sphere" as some scholars argue (Downey & Fenton, 2003, Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2015, Eickelman & Anderson, 2003)? In the case of social media in China, until 2015 scholars of communication studies hold a quite optimistic view about online activism in China, an authoritarian country with strict online censorship. They see social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat are advancing critical aspects of democracy, such as political engagement, citizenship, public sphere, and resistance (Deluca, Brynner, & Sun, 2016; Poell, De Kloet, & Zeng, 2014; Sima, 2011; Tong & Zhao, 2014) Particularly they argue that Weibo, as a digital platform, is able to facilitate open and critical debates about public and political issues that are not possible to take place in traditional media such as newspaper, radio, and TV (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2015).

While this study does not intend to challenge or reframe the argument of Weibo as a public sphere in China, I do want to point out that the low level of user participation in online conversation, which is reflected through the use of rhetorical strategies such as a high percentage of strategy #1 "to argue or to comment" and low percentage of strategy #7, #8, and #9 , indicates an inherent deficiency of Weibo communication. Weibo can function as an effective means to disseminate information and ideas, but it falls short of nurturing sophisticated public debate. As the results in Chapter IV show, strategies that require a deep level of user participation and engagement in the interactive conversation, such as #5 to inform, #7 to quote, #8 pressed opinion, and #9 to correct, show a very low percentage of frequencies, which suggests that users

are not deeply engaged in the conversation. The low-level participation, such as strategy #1 to comment or to argue, involves in a one-round interaction: the author posting a piece and the reader respond after reading the post. The high-level participation, featuring strategies like dealing with a situation when one is pressed for an opinion, involves multiples rounds of interaction: the author posting a piece, reader A responding, reader B responding to reader A pressing A for an opinion, reader A responding to B with either a direct approach or an indirect answer. The higher level of participation and engagement upholds the possibility to nurture sophisticated, complex, and in-depth discussion. While a considerable large portion of discussion on Weibo lacks depth in communication, then what kind of change and actions can Weibo introduce to Chinese society?

The low level of user participation might also explain the government's tolerance of many sensitive topics and speeches on Weibo. Lagerkvist (2010) in his insightful book *After the Internet, Before Democracy* argue that the seemingly increasing political participation on social media could be seen as a "safety valve" to reduce pressure on the Communist Party. The overly simplistic and lopsided preference of directness and strategies of low level participation support the "valve" theory.

6 CONCLUSION

In this dissertation I examine the so-called "indirection myth" (Mao, 2006) of Chinese rhetoric in contemporary context on social media. The study strives to answer two major research questions as follows:

3) *Generally speaking, does a preference for directness or indirectness exist in Weibo postings? If not, are the two strategies equally prevalent on Weibo?*
4) *What direct strategies are most preferred by Chinese Weibo users?*

The methodology I employ is a content analysis based on quantitative data and rhetorical analysis. I collect authentic postings from Weibo and have coders to categorize the posting according to a coding scheme of nine rhetorical strategies with each strategy divided into directness and indirectness.

My research shows that Weibo users have an overall preference for directness while they occasionally prefer indirectness, especially among users of academic backgrounds. Strategy #1 "to argue or to comment" is the most frequently used rhetorical strategy, and direct comment or argument with opinion proceeding evidence is the most used direct strategy. Strategies that indicate a high degree of user participation, such as quoting, comparing opinions, correcting factual information, and dealing with situation when one is pressed for opinion, are not frequently used.

I argue that anonymity and word limit affect users' preferences of rhetorical strategies as well as the preference of directness. The overly simplistic and lopsided preference of directness and strategies of low level participation indicate that Weibo's function is mainly disseminating information and expressing opinions and Weibo has not fully evolved to a public sphere because it is currently unable to foster complex, sophisticated discussion.

Considering the complex, dynamic, and fluid social and cultural context analyzed in this study, I propose to rethink the "rhetorical situation" in China and study the isolated island-ecology of Chinese cyberspace with a new paradigm.

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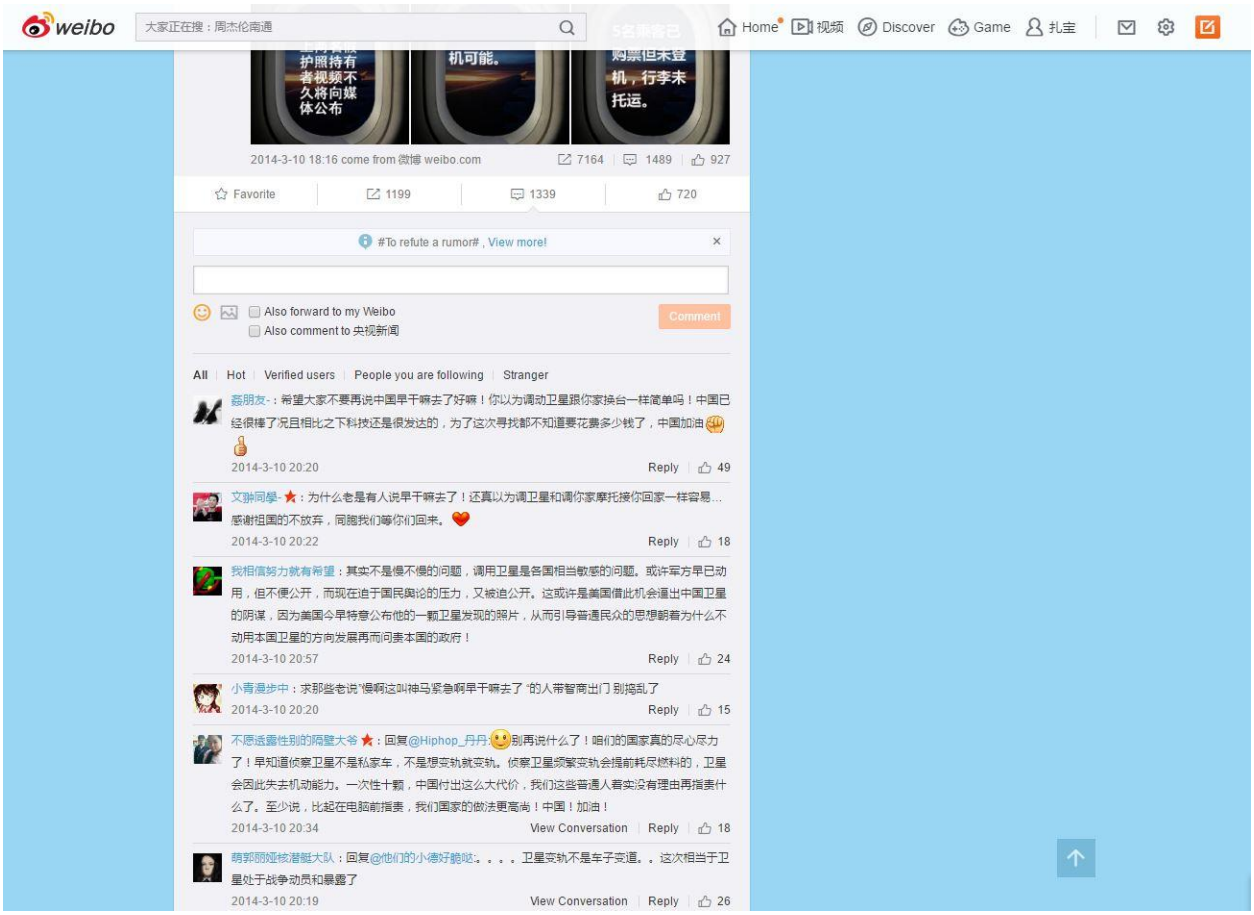
APPENDICES

Appendix A Introduction to selected posts

Appendix A.1 Post 1 The missing flight MH370

Literal translation of the original post:

[Our country urgently mobilize 10 satellites to support the search of the missing flight MH370] According to the website of Ministry of Defense, after the disappearance of MH370, Xi'an Satellite Control Center urgently mobilizes 10 satellites of 4 types to provide technical support to ground search. Some of the satellites have terminated the original plans.



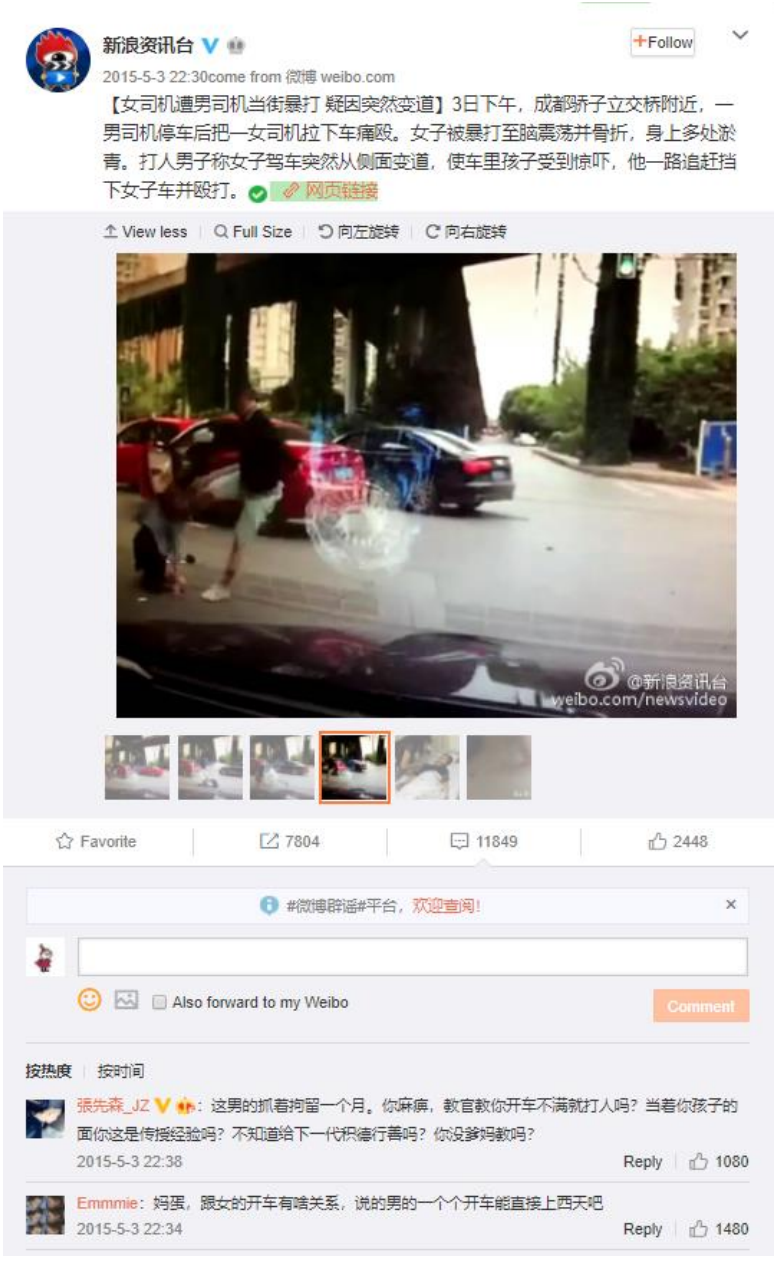
Appendix A.2 Post 2 Reckless driving and female drivers

URL:

http://www.weibo.com/3921730119/CgaGel61b?type=comment#_rnd1432786765933

Literal translation of the original post:

[A female driver was beaten by a male driver on the street, possible due to a sudden change of lane] In the afternoon on May 3rd, near Jiaozi Bridge in Chengdu, a male driver stopped his car, dragged a female driver off her car, and beat her hardly. The action had caused concussion, fracture, and multiple bruises on the female driver. The male driver said the female driver changed her lane suddenly from the side, which frightened his child on board. So he chased the female driver's car and beat her eventually.


新浪资讯台
Follow
2015-5-3 22:30come from 微博 weibo.com
【女司机遭男司机当街暴打 疑因突然变道】3日下午，成都驷子立交桥附近，一男司机停车后把一女司机拉下车痛殴。女子被暴打至脑震荡并骨折，身上多处淤青。打人男子称女子驾车突然从侧面变道，使车里孩子受到惊吓，他一路追赶挡下女子车并殴打。 网页链接
View less
Full Size
向左旋转
向右旋转
@新浪资讯台
weibo.com/newsvideo
Favorite
7804
11849
2448
#微博辟谣#平台，欢迎查阅!
Also forward to my Weibo
Comment
按热度
按时间
張先森_JZ：这男的抓着拘留一个月。你麻痹，教官教你开车不满就打人吗？当着你孩子的面你这是传授经验吗？不知道给下一代积德行善吗？你没爹妈教吗？
2015-5-3 22:38
Reply
1080
Emmmie：妈蛋，跟女的开车有啥关系，说的男的一个个开车能直接上西天吧
2015-5-3 22:34
Reply
1480

Appendix A.3 Post 3 iPhone lost a lawsuit of intellectual property in China

URL: http://weibo.com/2803301701/DAOtSuops?type=comment#_rnd1479010445458

Literal translation of the original post:

[Beijing IP Office ruled that iPhone 6 copied exterior design of a Chinese brand. Apple appealed and sued Beijing IP Office] Recently, Beijing IP Office ruled that the exterior design of iPhone 6 and iPhone 6 Plus violated the patent hold by Shenzhen Baili. The IP office ordered that Apple should stop the sale. Apple appealed to Beijing IP Court.

Appendix A.4 Post 4 Intellectual property

URL:

http://weibo.com/2803301701/DsKPAbWMq?type=comment#_rnd1479010625312

Literal translation of the original post:

[Intellectual Property Day: your love should be expressed through the respect to the authors] When writers see the pirate copies of their books, when directors and actors find out that their newly released movie has been pirated all over the internet… Paying for piracy, it looks like you gain convenience, but it is like throwing a cold blanket on the creative minds. Today, World Intellectual Property Day, respect originality, protect copyright, your love is expressed through your respect to the authors. Please support and retweet!

weibo
大家正在搜：特朗普外孙女背唐诗
Home
视频
Discover
Game
扎宝
人民日报
Follow
4-26 15:20come from 人民日报微博
【世界知识产权日：你的喜爱，体现在你对原作者的尊重上】当作家看到自己的书被盗印，当导演和演员发现自己的电影刚上映就在网上泛滥…为盗版买单，看似得到便利，却给多少有创造力的头脑泼了冷水。今天，世界知识产权日。尊重原创，保护版权，你的喜爱，就体现在你对原作者的尊重上！支持请转！
View less
Full Size
向左旋转
向右旋转
图书
你想过作家呕心沥血地写本书，却发现它被盗印、印刷模糊、错别字百出时的失落吗？
@人民日报
Favorite
935
285
648
#To refute a rumor# , View more!
Also forward to my Weibo
Comment
相关推荐
五军集结，雄关点将！由张艺谋执导的电影《长城》，即将于12月16日全国公映。11月15日，…
来自 电影长城
厉害了！J·K·罗琳表示，《神奇动物在哪里5》的结尾将以1945年邓布利多与格林德沃大战来…
来自 电影控控
【推荐9部不容错过的国产高分纪录片】9部9分以上的国产纪录片，不仅长见识，还能提高你…
来自 环球时报
#成龙##成龙获奥斯卡终身成就奖# 今天我们的偶像@成龙 大哥将走上奥斯卡红毯，成为华人…
来自 成龙吧官微
淘票票在线选座
来自 Luv_DC

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爱电影，请购买正版。
你的喜爱，就体现在你对原作者的尊重上！
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@人民日报
PEOPLE' S DAILY

Eight dogs
NIRE
WWW.NIRE.COM.CN
PUMA
odidos
商标品牌
拒绝山寨，拒绝假货，它们伤害的不只有设计者的灵感，还有我们作为消费者的权益。
@人民日报
@人民日报
PEOPLE' S DAILY

创意设计

很多创意看似灵光一现，背后却是成百上千份设计稿的推翻与重做。你是否愿意为实体付费，却不愿为智慧买单？

@人民日报 @人民日报 PEOPLE'S DAILY

音乐

习惯了免费听歌，但享受音乐的时候，你想象过作词作曲人背后的付出吗？

@人民日报 @人民日报 PEOPLE'S DAILY

漫画

你想过漫画家通宵达旦画画，作品却被随意去掉水印时的难过吗？

@人民日报 @人民日报 PEOPLE'S DAILY

原创文章

你想过作者辛辛苦苦写了一篇文章，未经授权就被各个账号转得铺天盖地时的心塞吗？

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软件

你想过程序员对着电脑编了大半年的软件，没发行几天就被盗版时的无奈吗？

@人民日报

电影电视

你想过导演、演员耗时几个月拍了一部作品，却发现它还没上映就已经在网上泛滥时的心情吗？

@人民日报

图书

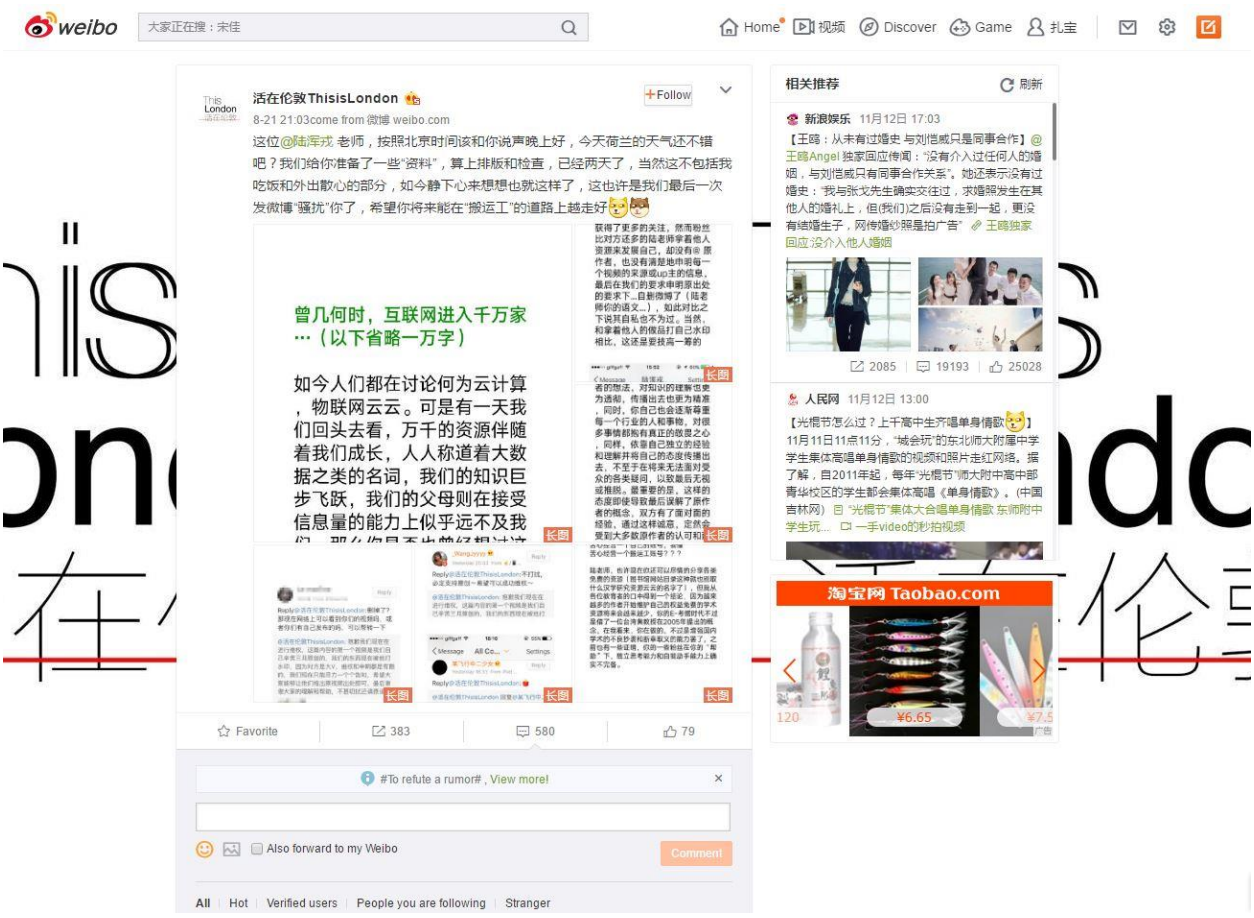
你想过作家呕心沥血地写本书，却发现它被盗印、印刷模糊、错别字百出时的失落吗？

@人民日报

Appendix A.5 Post 5 Accusation made by Huo Zai Lun Dun (The debate about sharing open resource and intellectual property)

URL: http://weibo.com/3962613075/E4CCtCK4u?type=comment#_rnd1479013679751

Huo Zai Lun Dun accuses another blogger Lu Hung Rong of copying content. Huo Zai Lun Dun writes a post containing an article of over 3,000 words and multiple images.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大家正在搜：宋佳
Home
视频
Discover
Game
扎堆
活在伦敦ThisisLondon
Follow
8-21 21:03come from 微博 weibo.com
这位@陆浑戎 老师，按照北京时间该和你说声晚上好，今天荷兰的天气还不错吧？我们给你准备了一些"资料"，算上排版和检查，已经两天了，当然这不包括我吃饭和外出散心的部分，如今静下心来想想也就这样了，这也许是我们最后一次发微博"骚扰"你了，希望你将来能在"搬运工"的道路上越走好
曾几何时，互联网进入千万家…（以下省略一万字）
如今人们都在讨论何为云计算，物联网云云。可是有一天我们回头去看，万千的资源伴随着我们成长，人人称道着大数据之类的名词，我们的知识巨步飞跃，我们的父母则在接受信息量的能力上似乎远不及我
长图
Favorite
383
580
79
#To refute a rumor# , View more!
Also forward to my Weibo
Comment
All | Hot | Verified users | People you are following | Stranger
相关推荐
刷新
新浪娱乐 11月12日 17:03
【王鸥：从未有过婚史 与刘恺威只是同事合作】@王鸥Angel 独家回应传闻："没有介入过任何人的婚姻，与刘恺威只有同事合作关系"。她还表示没有过婚史："我与张戈先生确实交往过，求婚照发生在其他人的婚礼上，但(我们)之后没有走到一起，更没有结婚生子，网传婚纱照是拍广告" 王鸥独家回应 没介入他人婚姻
2085
19193
25028
人民网 11月12日 13:00
【光棍节怎么过？上千高中生齐唱单身情歌】11月11日11点11分，"城会玩"的东北师大附属中学学生集体高唱单身情歌的视频和照片走红网络。据了解，自2011年起，每年"光棍节"师大附中高中部青华校区的学生都会集体高唱《单身情歌》。(中国吉林网) "光棍节"集体大合唱单身情歌 东师附中学生玩… 一手video的秒拍视频
淘宝网 Taobao.com
¥6.65

Appendix A.6 Post 6 Hun Rong's response to Huo Zai Lun Dun (The debate about sharing open resource and intellectual property)

URL: http://weibo.com/1617242303/E4Dqmc1W9?type=comment

Lu Hun Rong retweets the accusation without leaving any comment.

Appendix A.7 Post 7 Female Ph.D. in archeology and marriage

URL: http://weibo.com/1826294567/Efxr8qXd3?type=comment

Literal Translation:

My secondary schoolmate, the class queen, a girl born in 1982, attended Peking University majoring in archeology, and she has earned her doctoral degree. She has not found a boyfriend. I called her a few days ago to tease her. It is said that when she goes to match making, all the men runs away once they hear archeology. She is working at Shanghai Museum. Archeology + PhD, this combination is a great deduction to her.

迷老鼠-

+Follow

11-1 16:05come from 微博 weibo.com

我的中学同学，当年的班花，82年的姑娘，上了北大考古专业。一口气混到了女博士，如今还没找到男朋友。前段时间刚刚打电话调戏了一下。据说给她相亲，一听到考古两字就两脚开溜了。如今在上海博物馆。考古+博士给女孩子减分比较大

Favorite | 17314 | 4730 | 1084

#To refute a rumor# , View more!

Also forward to my Weibo

Comment

All | Hot | Verified users | People you are following | Stranger

小特_winster：难道她生下来就是为了嫁人的？！

11-1 23:54 Reply | 2879

小m的大手办：觉得考古博士减分的还不是因为自己没成就配不上，咋不问问男博士男博士后

11-2 09:43 Reply | 515

二二二二萌：人家混的圈子已经是你不能理解的啦，人家是你同学的时候就跟你没关系，以后也不会有什么关系的

11-2 10:46 Reply | 3851

七里河畔的白马浪：是配不上人家姑娘

11-1 19:03 Reply | 6025

蟹大富：自以为是又猥琐，别去打扰人好好一那么优秀的姑娘成么？

11-1 19:17 Reply | 11564

蓝叶丰玉_沙恭尼也是dramaqueen：一般的博士都不会嫁的太差，因为太差的懂得知难而退。考古更是其中高者，又有审美，又有学识，一般想高攀的会多掂量。

11-2 10:47 Reply | 1861

春之未央：你是我见过的给考古专业打的最好的广告

11-2 10:47 Reply | 1336

书墨城：回复@飞行羊ly:他一辈子都读不到博士，博士这种高度的世界是他不能理解和体会的，不可与夏虫语冰

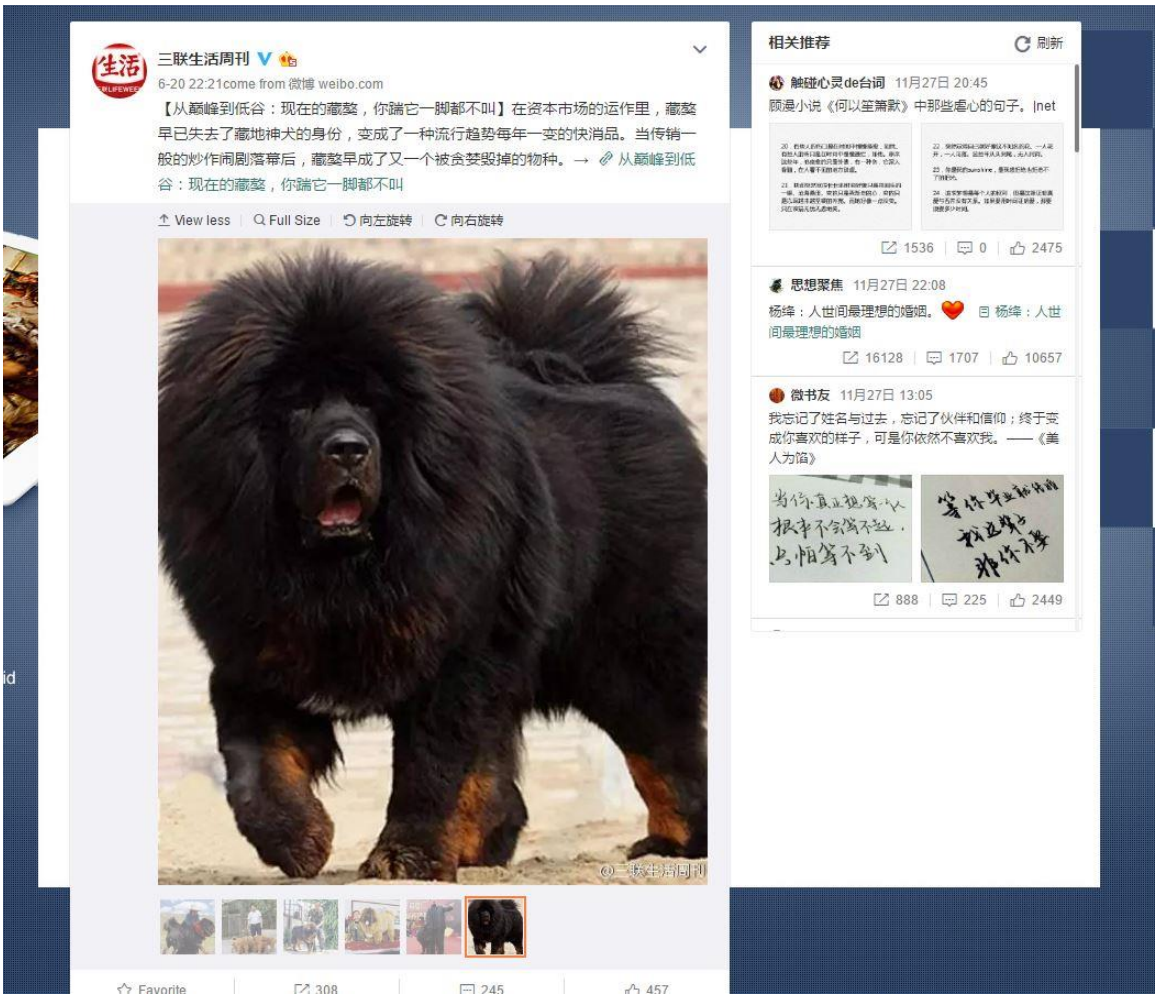
11-2 11:03 View Conversation | Reply | 587

Appendix A.8 Post 8 The rise and fall of Tibetan mastiff industry

URL: http://weibo.com/1191965271/DBa5GAEYy?type=comment#_rnd1480365572088

Literal translation:

[From peak to bottom: nowadays the Tibetan mastiff won't bark even if you kick it] On the capital markets, the Tibetan mastiffs have long lost its status as the holy canine of Tibet. It has become a popular trend or something like a fast-moving consuming goods that changes every year. When the chaotic marketing ends, the Tibetan mastiff becomes another specie destroyed by human greed.


三联生活周刊
6-20 22:21come from 微博 weibo.com
【从巅峰到低谷：现在的藏獒，你踹它一脚都不叫】在资本市场的运作里，藏獒早已失去了藏地神犬的身份，变成了一种流行趋势每年一变的快消品。当传销一般的炒作闹剧落幕后，藏獒早成了又一个被金婪毁掉的物种。→ 从巅峰到低谷：现在的藏獒，你踹它一脚都不叫
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1536
0
2475
思想聚焦 11月27日 22:08
杨绛：人世间最理想的婚姻。
杨绛：人世间最理想的婚姻
16128
1707
10657
微书友 11月27日 13:05
我忘记了姓名与过去，忘记了伙伴和信仰；终于变成你喜欢的样子，可是你依然不喜欢我。——《美人为馅》
888
225
2449
Favorite
308
245
457

三联生活周刊
6-20 22:21come from 微博 weibo.com
【从巅峰到低谷：现在的藏獒，你踹它一脚都不叫】在资本市场的运作里，藏獒早已失去了藏地神犬的身份，变成了一种流行趋势每年一变的快消品。当传销一般的炒作闹剧落幕后，藏獒早成了又一个被贪婪毁掉的物种。→ 从巅峰到低谷：现在的藏獒，你踹它一脚都不叫
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马俊仁
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1536 | 0 | 2475
思想聚焦 11月27日 22:08
杨绛：人世间最理想的婚姻。
回 杨绛：人世间最理想的婚姻
16128 | 1707 | 10657
微书友 11月27日 13:05
我忘记了姓名与过去，忘记了伙伴和信仰；终于变成你喜欢的样子，可是你依然不喜欢我。——《美人为馅》
888 | 225 | 2449

三联生活周刊
6-20 22:21come from 微博 weibo.com
【从巅峰到低谷：现在的藏獒，你踹它一脚都不叫】在资本市场的运作里，藏獒早已失去了藏地神犬的身份，变成了一种流行趋势每年一变的快消品。当传销一般的炒作闹剧落幕后，藏獒早成了又一个被贪婪毁掉的物种。→ 从巅峰到低谷：现在的藏獒，你踹它一脚都不叫
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Also forward to my Weibo
Comment
All
Hot
Verified users
People you are following
Stranger
_大椿_：想起了有天晚上我爸喝的迷糊糊的，就牵了条藏獒回到家里😂😂😂
6-20 22:47
Reply
26
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思想聚焦 11月27日 22:08
杨绛：人世间最理想的婚姻。
杨绛：人世间最理想的婚姻
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10657
微书友 11月27日 13:05
我忘记了姓名与过去，忘记了伙伴和信仰；终于变成你喜欢的样子，可是你依然不喜欢我。——《美人为馅》
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Stranger
_大椿_：想起了有天晚上我爸喝的迷糊糊的，就拿了条藏獒回到家里
6-20 22:47
Reply
26
相关推荐
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杨绛：人世间最理想的婚姻。
杨绛：人世间最理想的婚姻
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微书友 11月27日 13:05
我忘记了姓名与过去，忘记了伙伴和信仰；终于变成你喜欢的样子，可是你依然不喜欢我。——《美人为陷》
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@三联生活周刊
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#To refute a rumor# , View more!
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Comment
All | Hot | Verified users | People you are following | Stranger
_大椿_：想起了有天晚上我爸喝的迷糊糊的，就牵了条藏獒回到家里😂😂😂
6-20 22:47
Reply | 26
相关推荐
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杨绛：人世间最理想的婚姻。
杨绛：人世间最理想的婚姻
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微书友 11月27日 13:05
我忘记了姓名与过去，忘记了伙伴和信仰；终于变成你喜欢的样子，可是你依然不喜欢我。——《美人为馅》
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【从巅峰到低谷：现在的藏獒，你踹它一脚都不叫】在资本市场的运作里，藏獒早已失去了藏地神犬的身份，变成了一种流行趋势每年一变的快消品。当传销一般的炒作闹剧落幕后，藏獒早成了又一个被贪婪毁掉的物种。→ 从巅峰到低谷：现在的藏獒，你踹它一脚都不叫
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杨绛：人世间最理想的婚姻。
杨绛：人世间最理想的婚姻
16128 | 1707 | 10657
微书友 11月27日 13:05
我忘记了姓名与过去，忘记了伙伴和信仰；终于变成你喜欢的样子，可是你依然不喜欢我。——《美人为馅》
888 | 225 | 2449

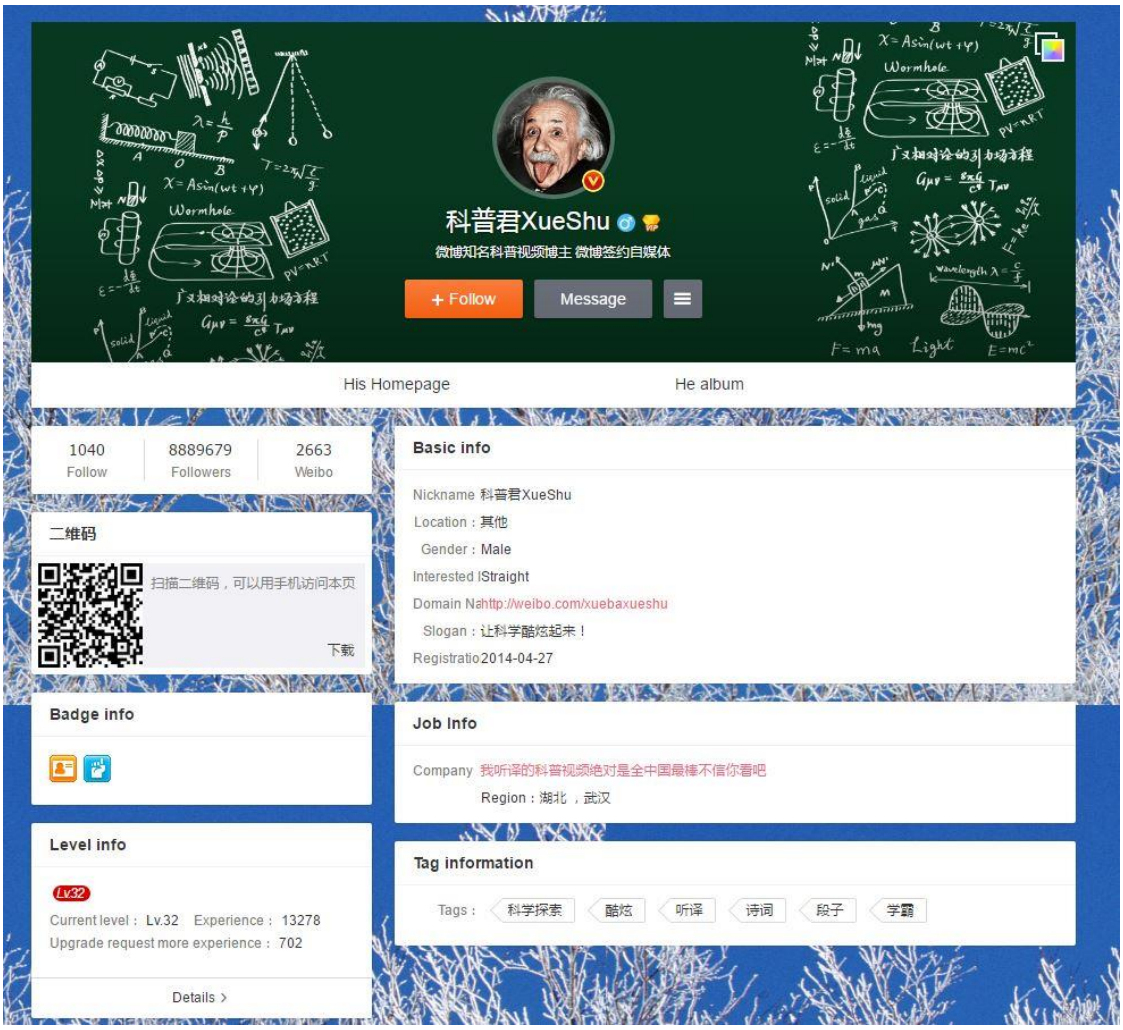
Appendix A.9 Post 9 A translated version of String Theory

URL: http://weibo.com/5097174964/E3pAbm4Uv?type=comment#_rnd1480377115987

Literal translation:

String theory argues that the space has nine dimensions. Why the space we see has only three dimensions? Where are the other dimensions? Comparing to the electromagnetic force and other forces, gravity is relatively weak. Why? An upgraded version M theory argues that the space has ten dimensions. You can refer to Stephen Hawking's *Brane New World*.

科普君XueShu
Follow
8-13 22:01come from 秒拍网页版
弦理论认为，空间其实是9维的。那为何我们看到的空间是只有3维？其他的维度去哪了?另外，相对于电磁力和其他基本作用力，万有引力其实是非常非常弱的。这又是为什么？（弦理论的进阶版M理论认为空间是10维的，可参考霍金《膜的新奇世界》）#酷炫科普小短片# 【第154期】 秒拍视频
收起
秒拍
那么夸克或电子之类的粒子，
其实是两端永远束缚在膜上的弦。
Favorite
12751
1742
5994
Also forward to my Weibo
Comment
All | Hot | Verified users | People you are following | Stranger
V1ncent_code：不要看见风就是雨，此膜非彼膜
8-13 22:12
Reply 159
水月君：有些人其实连膜的梗都了解得不是很清楚就别到处刷这个梗了，只会显得你跟个井底之蛙一样无知。
8-13 23:29
Reply 35
杰伦的男朋友：我发誓 我很认真的在看了，然而并没有什么卵用~
8-13 23:49
Reply 86
爱英语斯坦：好神奇！
8-13 22:29
Reply 8
相关推荐
刷新
英国报姐 12月02日 11:15
国家地理一组关于气候变化照片，看得人揪心，不知几十年后地球会是什么模样。
3408 796 6036
封面新闻 11月30日 15:30
【雾霾放大1000倍 居然长这样！】显微摄影师、天文摄影师、科普作家放出了一组照片，通过显微镜将雾霾颗粒放大1000倍。在微观角度上看，霾颗粒的形状各异，有复合体，有生物颗粒，有矿物质的，看上去触目惊心。雾霾天，我们不停地将这些小玩意儿吸入体内……#封面生活#（大河报）
165 64 127
淘宝网 Taobao.com
¥65.00
广告



Appendix A.10 Post 10 Nuclear fuel cycling

URL: http://weibo.com/1916074164/E32lLsxn4?type=comment

The author writes a long article of over 3,000 words to introduce basic concepts and rationales of nuclear energy cycling. Here is a literal translation of the intro part:

I thought about it and decided to write something to talk about the nuclear energy cycling project. I am sorry as I have done very little work. Intro: what is nuclear energy cycling? How doe a nuclear energy cycling plant work? Is the cycling plant safe? And some frequently asked questions.

Appendix A.11 Post 11 Lian Yun Gang Incident: A local protest against building a reclear recyclingplan

URL: http://weibo.com/5394371017/E2AwQBsVF?type=comment#_rnd1480829911439

Literal translation:

[arresting people incident last night in Lian Yun Gang] This post only represents the editor's personal opinion. I watched the videos shared by users. It showed that some people started first to throw bottles at the police. We all know this is assaulting police officers, not to mention they are Armed Police, whose duty is to crack down on crime and maintain social order. They are protecting you, but now you mistreat them. What are you thinking? In my opinion, there is no right or wrong in this kind of incident. The government should have publicized the

plan to inform everyone, because after the nuclear leak in Japan, we have become oversensitive. However, I want to say that is processing nuclear waste [nuclear cycling to be precise] more dangerous than nuclear plant? There are so many nuclear plants never leak, are we being unfounded? I hope everyone could stay calm, don't be fooled by some public accounts.

连云港生活资讯
Follow
8-8 12:03come from 荣耀7i 翻转吧视界
#连云港身边事#【连云港昨晚抓人事件】以下纯属小编个人看法:看网友们发的视频，是有人先用水瓶等扔向警察，大家都知道这属于袭警，后来发生冲突，开始动手，我就不懂了，有人用水瓶砸你你不生气么，更何况他们还是武警，平时为了公民去打击罪犯，他们职责就是维护社会秩序，一直维护你们，现在你们还要欺负他们，你们是怎么想的，在我看来，这种事没有谁对谁错，政府应该提前宣传一下，让大家了解一下，毕竟经过日本核泄漏，现在我们已经讨核色变，不过我想说，难道废料处理还会比核电站更危险么，那么多核电站都没泄露，我们是不是有点杞人忧天了，望大家冷静对待，不要被一些营销公众号蒙蔽双眼，不要人云亦云。不喜请喷
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