

**School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry**

**Visual Social Media and Vernacular Responses to Environmental  
Issues in China**

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Doctor of Philosophy  
of  
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# Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) – updated March 2014. The proposed research study received human research ethics approval from the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (EC00262), Approval Number #HRE2016-0263.

Signature: .....

Date: ...02/09/2019.....





# Abstract

In the past decade, environmental degradation has become a leading social concern in Chinese society. Due to the difficulties and complexities involved in solving environmental issues, the Chinese government gives its citizens more leeway to participate in environmental issues than in other areas of public affairs (albeit within a context of strict internet censorship and restricted protest rights). Within this limited space, the use of social media and mobile technologies has seen networked civic engagement with environmental issues increase. Many studies have examined the relationships between social media and civic engagement with China's environmental issues, focusing upon the opportunities brought by information and communication technologies (ICTs) and constraints faced by Chinese environmental non-government organizations (ENGOs) and citizens. However, although visual images have become the central component of social media, few studies have specifically examined the impact of visual social media on China's civic engagement.

This thesis investigates the role of visual social media in providing Chinese people with an alternative space to articulate their opinions on environmental issues. By studying three notable environmental cases that recently occurred in different Chinese cities, this thesis explores how Chinese citizens adopt visual social media practices as a response to environmental issues, and to aid in the fight for environmental justice. In this study, data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 32 interviewees, from interviewees' social media posts, and through personally archived visual images, to explore what forms of visual images were produced and circulated on social media, how Chinese citizens express their opinions through the forms of visual social media practice, and what impact visual social media-facilitated civic engagement has on Chinese society.

Based on the case studies, this study suggests that visual social media practices are prominent for citizen journalism, culture jamming, and other image-centric events. Compared with other studies that emphasize the advantage of visual images in circumventing internet censorship, this thesis pays more attention to how ordinary Chinese creatively incorporate various affect and emotions into everyday visual images to enhance the reach of their voices on social media. This thesis argues that affect and emotions are a kind of capital, which is conducive to accelerating

information dissemination. The alternative space enabled by visual social media for civic engagement is contingent, ephemeral and less likely to achieve any genuine political or social changes to Chinese society. However, because Chinese individuals have been informed and empowered by visual social media, they are able to discuss and comment on public affairs, and even negotiate with the government. It is no exaggeration to say that online environmental participation simply could not happen without the use of visual social media. Through the discussion, this thesis provides a new perspective to understand China's visual social media practices and its networked civic engagement.

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Purpose of the study

Due to its single-minded pursuit of economic development, China has been confronted with serious environmental deterioration in its modernization process. In the past decades, environmental degradation has become a leading social concern and caused social unrest in Chinese society. The number of large-scale protests associated with environmental issues has increased rapidly by an average rate of 29% every year since 1996 (Ru, Lu, & Li, 2010), and it rose by 120% in 2011 (Liu, 2013). For instance, a series of large-scale anti-paraxylene (PX) protests occurred in multiple Chinese cities from 2007 to 2014 (Liu, 2016). Almost all of these protests appeared to be successful in pushing the local governments to halt projects that might cause pollution. Since the increasing amount of environmental unrest challenges the legitimacy of its governance, in recent years the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been continually strengthening its control over protest information and social organizations online to prevent collective actions.

With the prevalence in China, social media and mobile technologies have opened a new arena of expression, participation, and organization for ordinary people. On China's social media, environmental discussion has become an integral part of everyday online communication as the issues continue to deteriorate. In Chinese society, public participation in the environmental sector is more common than in other social and political issues. This is because the complexity and difficulty of problem solving has led the Chinese government to leave a limited space for environmental actions. In certain circumstances, the Chinese government is capable of engaging and negotiating with other stakeholders to solve environmental issues in different levels rather than enacting stringent control (Wang, 2015). However, this does not mean that Chinese citizens are able to freely speak their opinions about the issues. In reality, due to stringent internet censorship, they still have to struggle with bypassing the censorship and enhancing the visibility of their everyday opinions.

With the advent of visual turn in today's social environment, visual practice has become a repertoire of social media in facilitating, mobilizing, and organizing civic engagement around the world (Prøitz, 2018). According to Highfield and Leaver (2016), with the convergence of mobile phone and camera applications (apps), everyday visual social media practice takes on various forms including selfies, memes, emojis, culture jamming, videos, GIFs (Graphic Interchange Format), and photographic tropes from social events, and so on. In the context of China, visual images instead of texts have been considered an effective way to circumvent internet censorship (Sullivan, 2014). The prominent examples such as 'grass mud horse' and 'Free CGC'<sup>1</sup> have proved the role of visual social media practices in presenting powerful statements of collective dissent in an authoritarian regime (Yang & Jiang, 2015). In the recent environmental cases that have occurred in China, visual images appear to have more potential than texts to mobilize collective actions and draw public attention. More importantly, compared with text, visual image provides grassroots and marginalized groups with a relatively low threshold to articulate their opinions.

Without a doubt, visual content on social media is an alternative site of struggle for Chinese citizens. According to John Hartley (1992), beyond circumventing censorship, visual images 'are the place where collective social action, individual identity and symbolic imagination meet – the nexus between culture and politics' (p.3). John Hartley (1992) has argued that the importance of visual images is how people create rather than represent reality. At the time of the study, a series of notable environmental events occurred in multiple Chinese cities. Through observation it has been found that numerous visual images were recorded by mobile phones and circulated on social media in the aftermath of the events. In this sense, it is important to understand what the contents of these visual images are and how Chinese citizens create visual content on social media to engage in environmental issues.

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<sup>1</sup> CGC refers to the blind lawyer and human rights activist Chen Guangcheng. After he was arrested, his supporters made internet memes featuring a graphic of Chen's face with his sunglasses that alter the KFC logo to say 'Free CGC' (Moore, 2012).



However, although the phenomenon of visual content bringing new possibilities to the networked civic engagement in contemporary China has received sufficient academic attention (Jiang, 2009; Mina, 2014; Svensson, 2016; Szablewicz, 2014; J. Xu, 2016; G. Yang & Jiang, 2015), only a few studies have investigated the relationship between visual social media practice and civic engagement from the perspective of China's environmental issues (K. DeLuca, Brunner, & Sun, 2016; Kevin M DeLuca, Sun, & Peeples, 2011). As one of the most active civic sectors in Chinese society (P. Ho & Edmonds, 2007a), the perspective of environmental engagement provides us with an opportunity to comprehensively understand the impact of new technologies on China's civic engagement. Therefore, this thesis aims to enrich the growing academic discussion surrounding the relationship between visual social media practices and networked civic engagement.

## 1.2 Civic engagement in China

Social media and mobile technologies have created more horizontal and participatory forms of civic engagement around the world. With significant economic freedom but stringent political control, civic engagement enabled by new ICTs is more vivid and multifaceted in Chinese society. A large number of studies have illustrated how creatively Chinese people use a variety of approaches to express their concerns on public affairs through social media. However, this creativity also exactly reflects the dilemma that Chinese citizens are excluded from the traditional political system and have insufficient channels to participate in public affairs. Although new ICTs provides Chinese citizens with new opportunities for civic engagement, they often have to struggle with pervasive surveillance and censorship (Chen and Reese, 2015).

Existing literature has offered different understandings and definitions of civic engagement, which are related to both collective and individual actions regarding issues of public concerns (Levinson, 2010; Sloam 2014; Theiss-Morse and Hibbing, 2005). In Western society, civic engagement involves a range of activities, such as "individual voluntarism, organizational involvement, and electoral participation" (Cheng, Y., Liang, J., & Leung, L, 2015). However, different from established democratic societies, the level of civic engagement in Chinese society is lower because of the strict political and social control (Wang, 2008). Current studies in

China's civic engagement have emphasized that social media and other new technologies empower Chinese citizens for public participation. For instance, Marina Svensson (2016) has argued that new ICTs, especially social media, provide Chinese citizens with opportunities to express discontent and challenge communicative power dominated by mainstream media. Meanwhile, many scholars (Bennett, 2012; Huang & Sun, 2014; Klinger & Svensson, 2014; Svensson, 2016) have also pointed out that networked civic engagement is issue-based and personalized.

Since visual images have increasingly played a critical role in online communication, this thesis focuses on Weibo and WeChat to explore the significance of visual images in facilitating a networked form of civic engagement with environmental issues in the context of China. The uniqueness of Chinese society leads to more diverse forms of networked civic engagement. From the aspects of environmental participation and visual images, I seek to investigate the opportunities and constraints of civic engagement enabled by Chinese visual social media, in order to offer a better understanding of how ordinary Chinese enjoy more freedom within a new alternative space facilitated by visual images on social media.

### 1.3 Research questions

The thesis situates everyday visual social media practices within the realm of China's civic engagement to investigate how Chinese individuals respond to environmental issues by adopting everyday visual social media practices. In this regard, the thesis seeks to investigate the relationship between visual social media practices and civic engagement in the context of China, explores the new image-dominated modes of networked environmental engagement, and examines the impact of visual social media practices on everyday opinions and discussions of environmental issues in China. Therefore, the primary research question is as follows:

*How do visual social media practices influence everyday opinions and discussions of environmental issues in China?*

In order to address the primary research question, I propose the following subsidiary research questions:

- (1) What forms of visual social media practices have recently been developed by Chinese individuals to respond to environmental issues?
- (2) How do Chinese individuals produce and create visual materials using mobile technologies and other such new technologies?
- (3) How do Chinese individuals enhance the visibility of their everyday opinions on social media by creating and circulating visual images?
- (4) What is the impact of the new modes of everyday visual social media practice on China's environmental engagement?

## 1.4 Research design

The research is grounded in three notable cases that recently occurred in multiple Chinese cities. Each case study responds to the research questions by presenting a specific subject concerning how local residents adopt and develop different modes of visual social media practice to engage in different environmental issues. In the first case study, I explore how citizen journalism performed as a form of storytelling to intervene in official discourse in the aftermath of a disaster event. In the second, I examine how culture jamming has been pervasively adopted to mock and criticize the government's unfulfilled responsibility in solving the air pollution crisis in Beijing. In the third case study, I analyse how grassroots environmental volunteers have created image events in an effort to monitor and improve the local water pollution situation in Hunan. Together, these three case studies follow a general trajectory of analysis of visual social media practices in environmental engagement but provide the reader with different perspectives to review.

### 1.4.1 Methods

The research predominantly relies upon qualitative and ethnographic data collection processes. Since this thesis seeks to understand how ordinary Chinese have responded to environmental issues via visual social media practices and conceptualized their experiences, and to examine the relationship between social media and individuals' everyday articulation, I draw upon case studies as a method to ensure that the research questions are well explored. In accordance with Yin

(2009), this method allows us to ‘understand a real-life phenomenon in depth, [and] such understanding encompasses important contextual conditions’ (p. 18). In this research, the real-life phenomenon is visual social media practices.

The ‘case’ refers to ‘a broad variety of topics, including small groups, communities, decisions, programs, organizational change, and specific events’ (Yin, 2014, p. 31). The unique strength of a case study is its ability to ‘recognize the importance of the subjective human creation of meaning, but doesn’t reject outright some notion of objectivity’ (Crabtree & Miller, 1999, p. 10). Moreover, it also provides participants with an opportunity to describe their views of the real world, which helps us to gain a better understanding of their actions (Lather, 1992; Robottom & Hart, 1993). In this sense, multiple-case studies are particularly appropriate to this research because visual social media practice is a subjective experience and can only be understood by the investigation of individuals’ engagement.

Given the political sensitivity of the topics, I draw on a series of in-depth interviews conducted during the fieldwork trips to investigate the cases and collect data. The fieldwork trips provided me with an opportunity to access central figures of the cases, observe participants’ daily practices on the ground, and communicate with them face-to-face. Conducting in-depth interviews enabled me to find out ‘how people have organized the world and the meaning attached to what goes on in the world’ (Patton, 2002, p. 341). All participants were selected by two criteria: they were involved with the environmental issues and they had posted visual images to respond to the environmental cases of the 2015 Tianjin explosions, smog in Beijing, and River Watchers in Hunan via social media. In this project, I conducted 10 in-depth interviews for each case.

The in-depth interviews were semi-structured, following a prepared list of predetermined questions I planned to discuss with interviewees. According to M. Q. Patton (2002), the semi-structured interview ‘provides topics or subject areas within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate the particular subject [of enquiry]’ (p. 343). To enrich the data collection, I handwrote field notes in a notebook to document my thoughts on interviews, important clues provided by participants, contact information of

participants, inspiring points of interviews, and other information involved with the research.

At the same time, a series of ethnographic methods were undertaken to mould the data collection. By exchanging social media accounts with participants, I adopted an online participant observation approach to observe how the participants distribute visual images on social media, especially on WeChat. For the case of River Watchers, online participant observation helped me to distinguish the difference between content distribution on Weibo and WeChat, which is considered as an online communication strategy by the participants. Moreover, I also adopted the approach of photograph elicitation to evoke deeper 'information, feelings, and memories' by inserting visual images into interviews (Harper, 2002, p. 13). This approach is able to connect memory to interviewees who could describe more details and provide information in relation to the past environmental events. To underpin the evidence, this research also analyses a variety of administrative documents, news articles, and blogs.

## 1.4.2 Interviewees

After obtaining human research ethics clearance in 2016, I began to invite people involved with the three cases to participate in the research project. Because the topic of the 2015 Tianjin explosions was still politically sensitive in China at the time of study, openly recruiting interviewees for the case was difficult. Instead, exploiting personal social networks and snowball sampling were the most effective methods to gain support and trust from interviewees. Almost all interviewees in the case of the 2015 Tianjin explosions were provided by the journalists who reported the disaster and were contacts of mine. The interviews were conducted over a year after the explosions. Due to the difficulty of recruitment, six interviews were conducted during the field trip in Tianjin, and four other interviews were conducted by telephone when I was based in Perth, Australia.

Since the topic of Beijing smog is less politically sensitive in China, I openly recruited some interviewees via Weibo and WeChat. In accordance with both domestic and international media reports, I targeted two potential interviewees who

created prominent visual materials on Weibo during the period of smog in Beijing. I sent the interview invitations to them and received their acceptance via Weibo messages. At the same time, I contacted one of the most influential Chinese Environmental Non-governmental Organization (ENGOS), the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs (IPE),<sup>2</sup> and attempted to recruit interviewees via their social network. This is because IPE has organized and mobilized the activity of air quality self-testing on Weibo for years. After being invited to join their WeChat group of volunteers, I posted a brief self-introduction and the advertisement of recruitment. I recruited the rest of the interviewees using my social network in Beijing and encouraged interviewees to invite their friends and acquaintances to participate in the research.

For the third case study I completed the recruitment with the help of Mr Liu Ke, who was the former organizer of the programme of River Watchers. Mr Liu helped me established a WeChat group and invited 11 potential interviewees to join. I began the recruitment in the group and conducted preliminary interviews with them to select more ideal interviewees. I recruited the rest of the interviewees for this case using a snowball approach. During the process of transcribing interview texts, I found a prominent research clue and conducted two more interviewees via online telephone calls when I was in Perth, Australia.

With the help of my contacts and interviewees, I finally completed 32 in-depth interviews with local residents, journalists, photographers, ENGO staff, and environmental volunteers, who are key figures in environmental events. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and an hour. To protect the identities of those concerned, some names and identifying information are either anonymized or altered via pseudonyms. Meanwhile, watermarks of social media accounts and other personal information on the visual materials have been blurred by manipulation software. The interviewees chose the pseudonyms assigned to them. Throughout the thesis, the interviewees who were concerned are de-identified as much as possible to avoid the potential risks of participating in the research.

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<sup>2</sup> The IPE is a Beijing-based non-profit environmental research organisation that has been collecting, analysing, and publishing data on pollution in China since it was founded in 2004.

### 1.4.3 Data collection

The research consists of two data sources: three case studies of notable environmental events in China focusing upon the content of visual social media practices regarding environmental issues, and second-hand data provided by media reports and official released documents that supply important background information and research cues. In the research, I conducted two fieldwork trips. At the time of study, online debates about the Tianjin explosions had faded and part of the visual data was gone due to government censorship; more importantly, the topic was extremely politically sensitive. In order to dig out more ‘hidden data’ that is difficult to access via public online sources, I conducted a fieldwork trip to Tianjin in September 2016. To observe and engage in the whole process of River Watchers documenting river pollution and circulating the visual materials on social media, I conducted the second fieldwork trip in multiple cities of Hunan in December 2018. Since Beijing smog is a long-term environmental issue and most of the interviewees were openly recruited online, I utilized telephone calls and emails to conduct the interviews. These mediated interviewing methods were particularly useful because they not only allowed me to maintain contact with interviewees after I left the field sites, but they also enabled me to conduct follow-up interviews with interviewees during the thesis writing process.

During the interviews, all interviewees were first asked to provide their demographic details including age, gender, and occupation. They were then encouraged to freely discuss their daily experiences with a particular focus upon their attitudes to environmental governance, motivations for visual social media practices, and recognition of the impact of visual social media content on environmental issues. Through the interviews, the semi-structured questions left room for me to raise responsive questions to gather more information. The interviews were voice-recorded using my mobile phone and transcribed as soon as possible after the completion of the interview.

During the process of data analysing, I invited interviewees to do follow-up interviews, which helped me confirm the unclear pronunciations in the recordings and the accuracy of the analysis I had conducted so far. Through follow-up questions,

I also sought further details of the interesting clues mentioned in the previous interviews. Slightly different from the previous interviews, apart from email, the follow-up questions were mainly exchanged by various mobile phone-mediated methods such as voices messages and instant messages on WeChat. Since the interviews were conducted in Chinese, all interview content was translated into English after transcription and checked for accuracy by a reliable translator.

The interviewees provided almost all the visual data presented in the thesis. During the fieldwork trips and interviews, I exchanged my personal WeChat and Weibo accounts with interviewees and thus obtained permissions to save the posts and images from their social media accounts. Apart from culture jamming presented in Chapter 4, it is difficult to trace the original authors; the rest of the visual data presented in the thesis have been authorized by the owners. Most examples of culture jamming were downloaded from interviewees' social media accounts except for 'Feed smog to the People' (see Figure 4.8). This culture jamming was prevalent on China's social media during the period of smog in Beijing, therefore, I downloaded it from an open online source and used it as photo elicitation to obtain more information from interviewees.

## 1.5 Significance of the research

Since visual content has become the central component of social media, this research is timely and significant for studies of China's networked civic engagement.

Although scholars have increasingly noticed the importance of visual social media practices in cultural, social, and political dimensions, the comprehensive study of visual social media practices and civic engagement within China's environmental communication is still at an early stage. Given the visual turn in online communication, this research is able to scrutinize the role of visual social media and mobile technologies in opening up new windows of opportunity for individuals' articulation and public discussion in China, where censorship is stringent and protest rights are limited. Under the theoretical framework of civic engagement, this research is an opportunity to contribute further empirical evidence through case study-led research to understand how Chinese citizens deploy visual social media practices to create an alternative space of civic engagement.



Secondly, the research seeks to provide an insight into China's networked civic engagement by revealing the specific forms of visual social media practice. Different forms of visual social media practice elicit different affect and emotions and lead to different reactions among audiences. In this sense, this research sheds light on the process of how 'solidarity, suffering, and witnessing are visualized, represented, understood, shared and acted upon' (Svensson, 2016, p. 65) in the forms of citizen journalism, culture jamming, and image events. In analysing the forms, this research is an opportunity to explore the potential of visual social media practices in China's networked civic engagement. Based on the analysis, this research also illustrates dynamics, motivations, and mechanisms of China's networked environmental engagement.

Finally, by utilizing affect studies and theory, this research aims to integrate affect into visual social media practices, which could help to explain how networked approaches incorporate affect in social movement (Brunner, 2017), particularly in the context of China. Based on interviews and collected visual data, this research illustrates how ordinary Chinese produce and create affective appeals in a variety of visual social media practices to engage in environmental issues and examines the role of affect in causing public resonance and driving collective actions on social media. In doing so, the research does not merely reveal the emerging trends of China's civic engagement in environmental issues but also sheds light on the importance of affect in transforming ordinary people's everyday experiences into shared public appeal on social media.

## 1.6 Thesis outline

This thesis is structured around the study of three notable environmental cases that recently occurred in multiple cities in China. This structure is intended to provide the reader with multiple perspectives to understand the new phenomena and modes of networked civic engagement in the context of China. The thesis begins with a comprehensive literature review to introduce the theoretical framework and key terms. Following this, the reader is taken through the three case study chapters. The case studies focus on unfolding the newly emerged methods of visualized digital

engagement in environmental issues in China and demonstrate empirical examples of the research question within the framework of civic engagement. These chapters are followed by the final chapter, which provides a thorough, critical discussion of the research findings and returns to address the research question and objectives.

After justifying the research questions that guide my analysis of the relationship between visual social media practices and environmental engagement in China, in Chapter 2 I present a comprehensive review of the theoretical and empirical literature that informs this thesis, introducing the key terms of China's environmental governance, internet censorship, environmental engagement, and visual social media practices. To provide the reader with a thorough understanding of environmental engagement within Chinese society, the literature review chapter compares the differences and commonalities in environmental governance, online environment, and visual practices on social media between China and Western societies. Following this, the chapter reviews current research concerning prominent visual social media practices and presents a historical overview of the various understandings of online visual practices involved with civic engagement found in Chinese society.

Following the literature review, Chapter 3 presents the analysis and findings of the case study of the 2015 Tianjin explosions from the perspective of citizen journalism. Although citizen journalism is not a new form of networked civic engagement that ordinary Chinese adopted to respond to environmental issues, it has not been studied much as storytelling in the aftermath of a catastrophic environmental event. This chapter highlights three visual flows that emerged on WeChat after the disaster, analyses the major patterns of the stories told by local residents with eyewitness images, and illustrates the motivations and process of updating various stories regarding the explosions on a relatively small and closed social media platform. In this chapter, I demonstrate that citizen journalism performed as storytelling is an affective form of communication. The collected WeChat posts show that the participants embedded sadness and sympathy in their stories to shape a strong sense of community and facilitated civic engagement at the neighbourhood level in a time of disaster. Based on the findings, I argue that citizen journalism as storytelling contributes to the visibility of citizens' voice and provides an alternative form of public participation in a highly politically sensitive topic in China.

Chapter 4 studies the visual social media practices in the case of Beijing smog. The interviewees presented several visual measures to comment on air pollution, but particular attention is given to the culture jamming. Among the environmental cases that have occurred in China in the past decade, it is rare to see that culture jamming has been so prominently adopted by Chinese citizens to mock the government's unfulfilled responsibility to improve the air quality. By appropriating and sabotaging existing popular cultural and political materials, Chinese social media users have creatively exploited humour and irony to criticize their undesirable environment. Chapter 4 examines a range of culture jamming provided by interviewees, who either posted on social media or saw these images from others' posts. To help the reader understand the presented culture jamming, this chapter provides the historical, cultural, and political contexts of the original visual materials before further analysis. By examining the culture jamming, the findings highlight that humour is the key affect eliciting public resonance and accelerating the dissemination. In addition, the analysis of in-depth interviews reveals the motivations for circulating the culture jamming in this case. As a result, I argue that Chinese citizens use culture jamming as an ironic criticism to articulate their disappointment and discontent with a long-lasting environmental issue despite the fact that culture jamming has also commonly served to smooth personal relationships on social media.

Chapter 5 studies the case of the image-oriented environmental advocacy campaign initiated by the Hunan-based grassroots ENGO Green Hunan since April 2011. In the campaign, Green Hunan calls on concerned local residents to join as volunteers and encourages them to regularly monitor and test water conditions in local rivers, especially where chemical plants are located. By using smartphones, volunteers document water conditions and test results, then post the images on Weibo via their personal accounts. This group of environmental volunteers is called River Watchers. Although this is not the first time that do-it-yourself activism has been adopted in environmental campaigns in China, this case presents some interesting and unique characteristics. By conducting fieldwork and in-depth interviews in multiple cities in Hunan Province, I found that the ENGO designed a practice schedule to prevent volunteers' aggressive expressions and critiques to the government, and some volunteers gradually established informal channels with local authorities and officers to solve issues. These situations demonstrate what Peter P. Ho (2007b) has noted: the

nature of China's environmentalism is depoliticized, and the characteristic of embeddedness means that Chinese ENGOs and environmental activists are partners with rather than adversaries of the government.

After a short period of success, however, the campaign became trapped in a communication dilemma when facing a content flood on social media; simultaneously, informal contact channels cannot always guarantee solutions to the problems. To overcome these hurdles, some River Watchers fully played their creativity in their everyday visual practices. The wedding photographs next to a polluted river is the most prominent example that has not merely gone viral on Weibo but has also drawn significant attention from mainstream media. To understand how the group of environmental volunteers present local water pollution problems in the photographs, I adopt the approach of visual rhetoric to analyse the collected visual data. By utilizing the concept of image event (DeLuca, 2012), I illustrate how the group of environmental volunteers facilitated civic engagement on Weibo. In this chapter, I found that River Watchers attempt to create shock effect to amplify the severity of the water pollution issues. The created everyday images provoke despair, anger, and sympathy to attract more public attention. Meanwhile, I argue that this group of grassroots environmental activists is attempting to enhance the visibility of their appeals by framing their reality. According to the findings, what distinguishes this mode of environmental engagement is how environmental activists have used images to re-politicize the advocacy campaign.

The final chapter pulls together the key findings of the case studies in an effort to address the research questions. I highlight that visual content on social media has opened up an alternative space for civic engagement in China. The conclusion begins with a summary of the main findings and the restatement of key arguments from three case studies. By discussing the dynamics, motivations, and modes of visual social media practices, it illustrates how the research lays the groundwork for such analysis. The conclusion then provides a critical reflection to demonstrate the unique combination of affect and visual social media practices in mobilizing and connecting distant people to engage in environmental issues. The discussion modestly comments on the role of visual social media-facilitated civic engagement in enhancing the visibility of ordinary people's everyday opinions. Finally, I raise several questions

in the chapter to call for more academic attention to future visual social media research.

# Chapter 2 Literature Review

## 2.1 Introduction

In the past decades, environmental degradation has become one of the most serious social concerns in Chinese society as the economy continues to grow. Existing studies have demonstrated that the emergence and boom of environmental activism in China is accompanied by the rapid development of the internet (Grano & Zhang, 2016; Sullivan & Xie, 2009; G.Yang, 2005). In recent years, the Chinese government has paid more attention to mitigating the country's serious environmental degradation but has also increasingly implemented more stringent control over both online and offline collective actions. Facing this situation, environmental non-government organizations (ENGOS) and environmental activists have not ceased their efforts but creatively articulated their opinions in various visual images by using mobile phones and social media.

Before further exploring research on the newly emerged phenomena of networked environmental activism in China, this chapter provides a detailed review of related academic research backgrounds to explore the relationship between networked environmental activism and everyday visual social media practices. Reviewing the academic literature within the field, the chapter first introduces environmental governance and the complex online environment in the context of China before moving on to an analysis of the ways social media empowers environmental activism. Everyday visual practices on social media are explored as a relatively effective method that assists ordinary Chinese in bypassing internet censorship and mobilizing collective actions, particularly with the power of playfulness. Following this, the chapter unfolds the importance of affect in activism and explores how visual content drives environmental activism by incorporating affect and emotions on social media.

## 2.2 China's environmental governance

After experiencing a large wave of environmental protests against major economic development projects since the mid-2000s (Grano, 2015; Steinhardt & Wu, 2016), the Chinese government has changed its attitude on environmental governance. According to the news report from Chinadialogue, the number of environmental

protests has increased by an average of 29% every year since 1996, and the number of major environmental incidents even rose by 120% in 2011 (Liu, 2013). Concerned by the growing number of environmental protests, the Chinese government has felt compelled to relax its strict political control and tolerate a certain degree of public participation in environmental issues.

In recent years, the Chinese government has become more receptive towards environmental issues (Grano & Zhang, 2016). In April 2014, a joint official report<sup>3</sup> openly acknowledged that severe environmental degradations are currently affecting the country. Moreover, environmental issues have been widely reported by the state-run media and frequently mentioned in high-ranking government leaders' speeches. For example, since 2103, to show its determination to improve the environment, Xi Jinping's administration has given numerous speeches on environmental topics and committed to adopting a more transparent approach to environmental issues (Grano & Zhang, 2016).

Meanwhile, the Chinese government has also been increasing its efforts to reform and develop a comprehensive legislative framework to halt environmental destruction. As noted by Grano and Zhang (2016), apart from the Environmental Protection Law of the People's Republic of China (《中华人民共和国环境保护法》), which was promulgated in 1979, nearly 30 environmental and natural resources-related laws, more than 60 administrative regulations, and over 600 rules for local environmental management have been published for the purpose of preventing pollution and protecting the environment in China. To expand the institutional channels for public participation, in December 2014 the government approved more than 700 NGOs to launch public interest litigation regarding violations of environmental law, and the government now imposes heavier punishments on polluters (French, 2015).

In addition, the Chinese central government has also developed a series of decentralized systems of environmental governance, because it believes that the lower government level has many advantages in problem-solving (Ran, 2017). Grano and Zhang (2016) have stated that the emphasis on decentralization of environmental

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<sup>3</sup> The joint report published by the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Ministry of Land and Resources on nationwide soil pollution in China.

governance has been reflected by several published official documents. In addition, the central government has also set environmental targets as one of the top priorities to evaluate local cadre performance in order to push local governments and officials to fulfil their environmental governance responsibilities (Chen, 2009).

However, the increasingly deteriorated environment and persistent public dissatisfaction suggest that the situation in China has not improved significantly. As a result, a number of scholars have questioned the efficiency of China's environmental governance, although the central government has demonstrated its concrete willingness to combat pollution and has made a series of positive changes. Scholars have attributed the failure of China's environmental governance to four reasons.

First, the Chinese government is more willing to solve the environmental problem by adopting new technologies rather than making any fundamental shift in its current developmental model, which prioritizes economic stability. In China, the gross domestic product (GDP)-dominated economy has been considered a national policy priority, and since the growth of GDP is an important indicator for evaluating cadres, the local government is always willing to sacrifice the environment to maintain high economic growth rates (Chen, 2009).

The second reason for the failure of China's environmental governance is the weak enforcement of environmental laws and regulations. Zhang and Shaw (2015) have made the criticism that the regulations merely served as a showcase as they are not enforced strictly by local governments. Sometimes, the government creates environmental policies to calm the rising social discontent and maintain social stability (Grano & Zhang, 2016). Kostka and Hobbs (2012) have attributed the dysfunction of China's environmental performance to the wide gap between policies made by the central government and implementation outcomes at the local levels. For example, although the Communist Party has upgraded environmental targets in the cadre performance evaluation system, it is difficult to find a case where officials were blamed or punished for a problem involved with environmental protection (Ran, 2017).



Third, the ambiguity of laws and regulations prevents the effective implementation of environmental governance (Grano & Zhang, 2016). In her influential news investigative report, Liu Yiman (2015) discloses that local environmental protection agencies do not have the power necessary to maintain fairness in environmental impact assessment (EIA) projects, and they are always put in a difficult position. However, EIA is supposed to be the most important and often-obligatory process to predict the environmental consequences of proposing or launching a plan, policy, programme, or project in China.

The fourth reason for the failure of China's environmental governance is the 'lack of adequate agency transparency and public participation in environmental policy making and implementation' (Tang & X. Zhan, 2008, p. 430). While the Chinese government has realized the necessity of cooperating with civil society to solve environmental degradation, the social and political space opened for citizens and NGOs to participate in public affairs is relatively limited (Ho & Edmonds, 2007b; Xu, 2014). In reality, it is difficult for civic organizations and citizens to find effective channels to obtain information, participate in policy decision-making, and express their opinions. Moreover, scholars S. Tang, Tang, and Lo (2005) have argued that a lack of organized social interests among citizens is also an important factor limiting the information transparency and public participation in environmental issues in China. Therefore, Peter Ho (2008) has lamented that the formalized and institutionalized channels for public participation and engaging in policy-making do not really exist in China.

## 2.3 Social media and censorship in China

Studies on China's social media and censorship are numerous. The existing literature surrounding social media in China continues to reflect a tendency of ideological dyad (Sullivan, 2014; Svensson, 2014; F. Yang, 2016), which is what Wendy Chun (2008) has described as 'the coupling of control and freedom' (p. 1). Jonathan Sullivan (2014) has thus described scholars who study China's social media as 'cyber-utopian' and 'cyber-realists'.

On one hand, scholars who are cyber-utopian (Nisbet, Stoycheff, & Pearce, 2012; Wallis, 2011) argue that social media has positively changed the state-society

relationship and brought pluralization and liberalization to Chinese society. In terms of political impact, Sullivan (2014) has argued that social media has long-term implications for the future development of collective action and the emergence of social movements in China. Cara Wallis (2011) has even claimed that Chinese social media has become ‘an active realm for public discussion, information dissemination, and mobilization in ways that are both sanctioned and discouraged by the government’ (p. 419). More importantly, the Chinese working-class has adopted a variety of social media as important tools for expanding the media ecology of resistance (Qiu, 2016).

On the other hand, scholars who are cyber-realists (Roberts, Zuckerman, Faris, York, & Palfrey, 2011) concerned that the state exerts strict online restrictions over individual speech and adaptively uses the information communication technologies (ICTs) to maintain its control. A large number of studies have demonstrated a particularly strong research interest in documenting and analysing the censorship and surveillance practices concerning social media in China (Bamman, O'Connor, & Smith, 2012; Cairns & Carlson, 2016; King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013; Qin, Strömberg, & Wu, 2017). In addition, Jonathan Hassid (2012) has argued that Chinese social media have actually been used as ‘a safety valve’ (MacKinnon, 2008, p. 33) to vent people’s emotions and grievances in order to prevent protests in the street.

This section mainly focuses on introducing the development and affordances of China’s two leading social media platforms, which are pervasively adopted by Chinese activists. In addition, this section also elaborates on the complex operation system of internet censorship to help better understand China’s unique online environment.

### 2.3.1 The rise of China’s social media

China has the largest internet population in the world. According to the 41th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China, China reached approximately 772 million internet users in March 2018, 753 million of whom are mobile phone users (CNNIC, 2018). This massive internet population enables China’s internet to be ‘one of the most vibrant economic and social cyberspaces in the world’ (Yeo & Li, 2012). A great deal of existing literature has proved that social media can provide ordinary Chinese with both a powerful tool and a novel space to challenge the

relationship between the state and society (Teng, 2012; J. Tong & Zuo, 2014; Y. Tong & Lei, 2013).

Although the Chinese government has blocked Western-based social media services like Facebook, Google, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram since 2009 (Branigan, 2010a), people still have an abundance of competitive domestic social media services to choose from. To counteract the demands for social media apps, the Chinese government encourages and supports domestic companies to develop and tailor social media services for the market (Martin, 2011). Today, WeChat and Weibo are two leading social media platforms absorbing the attention of users in China. By the end of 2018, the monthly active users for WeChat was in excess of 1 billion (Tencent, 2019). This is because, in addition to the domestic market, WeChat is widely used in Southeast Asian countries and some developed Western countries where Chinese companies and immigration have a notable presence (Lee, 2019). Since the 2013 crackdown, Weibo had experienced a long period of decline in its number of monthly active users. However, it has demonstrated a resurgence trend in recent years. According to the latest official data, the number of monthly active users reached 462 million in December 2018 (Weibo, 2018).

A large number of previous studies on environmental activism in China have demonstrated that these two social media are primary choices for Chinese ENGOs and environmental activists. Moreover, based on the data collected from fieldwork, these two social media platforms are the major channels for ordinary Chinese to engage in public events. Therefore, the following sections introduce the affordances of Weibo and WeChat.

### **2.3.2 Weibo**

Weibo is often referred as ‘Chinese Facebook’ or ‘Chinese Twitter’. Since its launch in 2009, it has become the largest and most influential Chinese microblogging site (Sullivan, 2014) where users can frequently and immediately get information; update their activities, opinions, and status; and communicate with other users (L. Zhang & Pentina, 2012). In less than two years, Weibo tripled its size and number of registered users, dramatically reaching 300 million in February 2012 (Phneah, 2012) despite there being many ‘zombie’ accounts (Svensson, 2016).

Similar to Twitter, Weibo has a 140-character length limitation. On Weibo, users can follow any account, make direct comments under original posts, and repost others' posts to their own homepages. With abundant visual affordances, users are allowed to insert graphic emoticons and attach links, pictures, videos, and music to each post. Additionally, users can use the format @username to remind someone to read the message and create hashtags to facilitate conversations.

Weibo has changed the way information is received and disseminated in China (R. Huang & Sun, 2013; Sullivan, 2014; Teng, 2012). With the follower network mechanism, Weibo provides Chinese people with a novel space for information-seeking and public debate (Huang & Sun, 2013). With the rise of citizen journalism, many prominent news stories and public events first began to spread on Weibo, and people thus obtain more timely information via this platform than mainstream media (Han, 2016). As a result, a number of scholars (Han, 2017; Sullivan, 2014) have argued that microblogging has destroyed the mainstream media's information monopoly and triggered Chinese citizens' enthusiasm to engage in public discussions. However, Jonathan Svensson (2014) has also questioned the equality of communicative power on Weibo and criticized the privileges granted to a certain group of users including opinion leaders and celebrities due to market exposure.

However, facing the increasing challenges of freedom of speech on Weibo, the government has considered the social media platform a 'main battle ground' to strengthen its control of the internet (Nip & Fu, 2016). In 2013, the most significant crackdown was launched on Weibo, and a number of well-known critical and influential microbloggers were arrested for spreading rumours and other criminal offences (Han, 2016). Moreover, internet companies and celebrities were invited to discuss their social responsibilities and publicize the official propaganda line. In its statements and speeches, the state Internet Information Office emphasized the importance of fighting rumours and controlling the internet. The crackdown directly resulted in a migration of Chinese social media users from Weibo to WeChat, which is a more closed and private social media platform (Tu, 2016).

### 2.3.3 WeChat

WeChat, an instant messaging and calling app bundled with multi-functional social features, was launched by Tencent in 2011. It has been compared with WhatsApp (an American instant messaging service), but Svensson (2013) has commented on his blog that WeChat is ‘a better WhatsApp crossed with the social features of Facebook and Instagram, mixed with Skype and a walkie-talkie’. As the official report announced, WeChat has been integrated into the daily social life of users and created a new digital life style in China (WeChat, 2015).

By developing more convenient and versatile features, WeChat enables their users to send messages via a variety forms including texts, voice, pictures, and videos, to either a person or a group. In addition to exchanging messages, WeChat users are able to read news from public accounts, establish groups with different purposes, send ‘a red envelope’ (called hongbao 红包 in Chinese, which refers to a monetary gift) to friends or family to demonstrate care, update posts in Moments (also called the friend circle), split the dinner bill with friends by using the AA function, play mobile games, or even organize protests to defend rights.

Compared with Weibo, WeChat has a much higher threshold for entry. The most significant difference is that the social circles on WeChat are more private and exclusive. While users can simply follow any accounts on Weibo, WeChat users are required to obtain permission to see individuals’ accounts and browse their posts in Movements. The Facebook-like function ‘Moments’ was added to WeChat in April 2012. By using it, users are able to post texts, emoji, pictures (limited to nine within one post), 10-second videos, and links from other social media platforms to share with their followers. After reading others’ posts, subscribers can press ‘Like’ or leave comments. However, even under the same post, subscribers cannot see others’ reactions unless they follow those others’ accounts.

In this sense, Eric Harwit (2017) is concerned that the narrowed circles on WeChat limit the spreading effect of information, and Chinese citizens perhaps have less opportunities to share their opinions publicly in a broader internet space, which could have a negative impact on the development of civic engagement in China. However, K. Deluca et al. (2016) have argued that the private and exclusive characteristics of WeChat actually form a more intimate sense of community, which is beneficial to organize and mobilize ENGOS’ online environmental campaigns. Although it is

difficult to see how a message travels through the platform, WeChat has the potential to spread it beyond a personal network.

An emerging body of literature has revealed that WeChat has become a critical discursive space that empowers Chinese citizens to articulate their opinions on political events and mobilize collective actions. Fangjing Tu (2016) has pointed out that the technical features on WeChat provide users with more possibilities to bypass internet censorship; therefore, WeChat has become a critical and comfortable platform to promote public debates and popular protests in China. Based on the case study of the Maoming anti-PX protest in 2014, Lee and Ho (2014) have found that WeChat is the only relatively effective online channel to circulate information during a period of protest and have emphasized that the limited scope of information dissemination actually creates reliability among information senders and receivers.

### 2.3.4 Internet censorship in China

MacKinnon (2009) has explained how internet censorship works on three levels: the government, internet companies, and citizens. To provide a comprehensive understanding of China's internet censorship, this section focuses on the current studies on how the three aforementioned sectors interact within the complex operation system of internet censorship. In particular, this section investigates scholarly literature about how ordinary Chinese circumvent the strict censorship in their country and articulate their opinions using visual methods on social media.

Existing studies have provided considerable evidence to demonstrate that the internet could jeopardize the legitimacy of the one-party state to rule the country (Chen & Ang, 2011; MacKinnon, 2012; Ng, 2015; Xiao, 2011; Y. Zhang, 2010). The fundamentally interactive character of social media allows citizens to discuss public affairs widely and threatens the government's ability to control online public discussions (Willnat, Wei, & Martin, 2015). Therefore, the Chinese government has developed complex censorship apparatuses to control the internet while also leaving a limited space for critiques of government policies and officials (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013).

Many of the discussions on internet censorship in China have highlighted the intensive control imposed by the one-party state. Among these discussions, one research line has revealed how the state adapts to the rapid development of ITCs and harnesses social media as a new tool to maintain its governance (Harwit & Clark, 2001; Gary King, Pan, & Roberts, 2017b; Noesselt, 2014). Scholars have also emphasized that the multilayered censorship system allows people to criticize the government, officials, and policies online to a certain extent, but it blocks any discussion that could provoke large-scale collective action offline (Gary King et al., 2013; Pan, & Roberts, 2014). Susan L. Shirk (2011) has pointed out that the Chinese government actually enjoys the benefits from opening the limited online space, which provides an insight into what is provoking collective action. In other words, the Chinese government takes the internet as a ‘dual use problem’ (Chen & Ang, 2011).

Scholarly literature has elaborated on how the Chinese government monitors and intervenes in online content by adopting sophisticated technical approaches. Scholars (G. King et al., 2013) have found that the Great Firewall, keyword blocking, and human censors, which aim to preclude the potential of collective actions by clipping the social ties within such groups, are three major approaches of censorship. Apart from blocking foreign websites, the Great Firewall is also used to break off the connection between users and the website when it discovers the blacklisted keywords. On social media, keyword filtering and deletion are the most common approaches implemented on individual posts (Bamman et al., 2012; King, Pan, & Roberts, 2017a).

Moreover, the Chinese government has imposed ‘reverse censorship’ to strategically fabricate people’s online opinions in multifarious ways (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2017b; Sullivan, 2014). A large number of internet police, internet monitors, and internet commentators have been employed to monitor public discussions and sway public opinions (X. Chen & Ang, 2011; King, Pan, & Roberts, 2017a). In particular, internet commentators are hired to post enormous fabricated comments on social media as if they were genuine opinions from people (Henochowicz, 2014; Tong & Lei, 2013). Furthermore, local governments have established their official microblogging accounts to expand the influence of central propaganda in the online

civic realm (Jiang, 2009), and this act has been viewed as an ‘occupy microblog movement’ (Schlæger & Jiang, 2014). All these measures indicate that the state has adopted and adapted social media as a new tool to maintain its governance.

However, many critical scholars have argued that ‘state control’ is too simple a concept to capture the complexity of China’s internet censorship. Scholars have pointed out that the government is operating its multilayered internet censorship together with private internet companies (MacKinnon, 2009; Pan, 2017; F. Yang, 2016). Since 1996, the Chinese government has been creating a highly constrained regulatory environment to manage the internet (G. Yang, 2003a) and has successfully passed most of the responsibility for censorship to the private service and content providers (G. King et al., 2013). If they fail to comply with these censorship regulations, the private internet companies can be punished by penalties of fines, shutdown, or criminal liability (MacKinnon, 2008).

In addition, market exposure is also an important dynamic for these domestic internet companies to adopt the principle of ‘self-discipline’ (Hughes & Wacker, 2003; Pan, 2017). As Jennifer Pan (2017) has noted, China’s social media companies widely accept censorship as part and parcel of developing their business in the domestic market. Meanwhile, these companies are quite flexible in implementing censorship (Crandall et al., 2013; MacKinnon, 2009). In the process of implementation, social media companies sometimes try to push the censorship boundaries of what is acceptable to the government rather than always blindly following the official directives (G. Yang, 2009).

While internet censorship is heavy, Chinese netizens have found and created many ways to get around the censorship (Mathieson, 2006; G. Yang, 2009). Scholars consider these practices of evading censorship a form of resistance against the government’s domination. According to the existing literature, Chinese people mainly adopt three approaches to evade internet censorship: circumvention tools, language evasions, and visual resources.

First, circumvention technology is used to access blocked foreign information. In China, it is no secret that virtual private network (VPN) services are widely and frequently utilized by Chinese users to bypass the Great Firewall and access



information from blocked foreign websites (Roberts, Zuckerman, & Palfrey, 2011). However, the government keeps updating more sophisticated measures to prevent Chinese citizens from accessing the blocked content (Q. Yang & Liu, 2014). Although scholars (Mou, Wu, & Atkin, 2016) have found that most use of circumvention tools in China has nothing to do with non-political needs, the Chinese regulators decided to ban circumvention tools in July 2017 (Haas, 2017).

Second, language evasions are used to deal with keyword blocking. It has become a pervasive online practice that Chinese netizens use homophones and homographs to replace banned words or phrases (G. King et al., 2013). A representative example of a homophone is that the Mandarin term ‘harmony’ (和谐) has often been written as ‘he xie’ (河蟹), which literally means ‘river crab’. In the context of China, ‘harmony’ refers to the official state slogan of ‘building a harmonious society’. Along with ‘river crab’, Chinese netizens also created ‘grass mud horse’ (草泥马), which is an obscene swear word used to mock China’s online policies (Qiang, 2011; F. Yang, 2016).

Third, a variety of visual materials are used to keep blocked topics in conversation on social media. Compared with texts, visual materials have a unique advantage for bypassing the censorship in that they cannot be pre-blocked. While visual resources can be banned by manual censorship, there is a delayed gap between circulation and deletion (Mina, 2014). Since internet censorship relies more on keyword filtering techniques, visual materials have been prominently deployed as an effective way to elude the censors in China (Sullivan, 2014). One of the most common practices on China’s internet is when some ‘sensitive’ posts are deleted due to content violation, Chinese netizens take screenshots to save the texts as pictures and then post them on social media again. In reality, scholars (Kou, Kow, & Gui, 2017) have found that Chinese netizens consider images a non-machine-readable way to communicate and enjoy using the visual form to express their opinions.

Apart from circumventing internet censorship, ordinary Chinese also deploy visual materials as an online counter-narrative to challenge and mock internet censorship (Levine, 2012). As early as June 2009, Chinese netizens created an internet meme of Green Dam Girl, which is a Japanese anime-style virtual female character, in order to express their dissent to internet censorship. Since the authorities consider Japanese

popular culture a negative influence, Saito (2017) has argued that the meme also aims to express people's dissent from the restraint of public access to Japanese anime and manga. Another notable example is the iconic images of an empty chair. In December 2010, the well-known Chinese dissenter Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, but could not attend the ceremony due to his imprisonment in China (Branigan, 2010b). Simultaneously, although relevant discussions were under strict surveillance and inaccessible, Chinese netizens began to circulate images of an empty chair on Weibo to show their support for Xiaobo Liu and protest the government's control.

As a byproduct of internet censorship, current literature states that Chinese netizens have consciously managed to minimize the possibility of being censored for both the content they produce and the commentary they receive (MacKinnon, 2011; Schlæger & Jiang, 2014). Chinese organizations and individuals often adopt self-censorship as a strategy to cope with internet regulations (Zhong et al., 2017). The behaviour of filtering their own thoughts or expressions before publishing and sharing not only reflects people's fear of the authorities (Lee and Chan, 2009) but also their acceptance of the censorship and avoidance of punishment or political risk (Simons and Stovsky, 2006).

## 2.4 China's networked environmental activism

Environmental issues are one of the most prominent social topics trending on China's social media (K. Deluca et al., 2016). While heavy internet censorship has been imposed in China, recent studies have demonstrated that social media has played a key role in opening up new channels of possibilities for collective action (S. Grano, 2015; Tai, 2015; X. Zhang & Shaw, 2015). Elizabeth Brunner (2017) has asserted that Chinese environmental activism is less likely to occur without the use of social media. Supported by mobile technologies and social media, Chinese activists have enriched the modalities of environmental activism and provided a large number of vibrant examples of proliferating environmental activities.

In China's complex political environment, environmental activism is different from what can be witnessed in democratic countries. To provide a thorough understanding of the uniqueness of China's environmental activism, it is necessary to highlight the

existing studies on how environmental activism emerged and developed in China, how the state governs with respect to environmental issues, what the status and roles of ENGOs are in Chinese society, and how environmental activism is conducted on Chinese social media.

## 2.4.1 The development of environmental activism in China

Compared with many industrialized and developing countries, the emergence of environmental activism in China lagged behind. In the most industrialized countries, the emergency of an environmental civil society sector occurred in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, and such sectors were formed in some developing countries in the 1980s (Xie, 2012). Accompanied by the establishment of ENGOs and the internet, China's environmental activism emerged in the mid-to-late 1990s (G. Yang, 2005). Through participating in the ENGOs and using ICTs, ordinary Chinese eventually found an effective way to engage in environmental policy-making. Since its emergence, the environmental realm has become one of the earliest and most active sectors of civil society in China (P. Ho & Edmonds, 2007b). Moreover, unlike traditional Chinese politics, which is often top-down, China's environmental activism is strongly bottom-up grassroots politics (G. Yang, 2003b).

According to the current literature, the burgeoning of China's environmental activism can be attributed to three major factors. The first is the relaxation of the political atmosphere in China (Sima, 2011). As the environment continues to deteriorate, the Chinese government has realized the importance of ENGOs in 'fill[ing] a critical gap in the state's capacity to protect the environment effectively' (Economy, 2005). To maintain social stability, the government has not only increased its transparency and efforts on improving the environment but has also provided ENGOs and environmental activists with a more favourable environment to express their opinions and engage in environmental policy-making at various levels (Wu, 2013; Xie, 2012; Zhan & Tang, 2013).

The second factor is the flourishing of the non-governmental sector in contemporary Chinese society. In the context of China, the marketization and privatization of the Chinese economy has promoted the expansive growth of non-governmental

organizations (Howell, 2004). According to Peter Ho (2007), in the late 1990s, the Chinese government was facing a difficult and complicated economic situation while implementing a major restructuring of state industries and terminating the state bureaucracy. As a result, the government had to cut back on its public expenditures and made moves to open political and social space for NGOs to be more supportive to help disadvantaged groups in a variety of voluntary civic actions (Ho, 2007).

The third factor is the innovation of ICTs. A large body of literature emphasizes the critical role of ICTs in empowering both groups and individuals to articulate arguments, record and curate events, affect official policy-making, and mobilize collective action (Jiang, 2016; Mercea, 2012; G. Yang, 2003a, 2009). From environmentalists' social media posts to mobile phone apps, it is evident that digital media has not merely provided new avenues to protest but has also transformed the roles and impacts of environmental activism (Cox, 2010). As a result, 'growth in networked digital communications technology innovation and use since the 1990s has helped to change the conditions for visibility in environmental politics' (Lester & Hutchins, 2012, p. 848).

However, although environmental activism has been developing steadily in Chinese society in the past decades, it differs from what has occurred in Western countries. In the context of China's 'semi-authoritarian' society (Ho, 2007), regarding the government's attitude towards public participation, Goldman (2002) has explained that 'political rights are to enable citizens to contribute to the state rather than to enable individuals to protect themselves against the state' (p. 159). Through implementing a series of regulatory approaches, Chinese ENGOs are highly constrained by the government (Schwartz, 2004), and environmental activism thus has 'mostly fragmentary, highly localized and nonconfrontational' characteristics (Ho & Edmonds, 2007b, p. 332).

Due to the 'de-politicized' (Howell, 2004, p. 162) character of China's civil society, Chinese ENGOs have been prone to adopt a non-confrontational stance in order to avoid potential political risks. Like in Western society, environmental activities conducted by the Chinese ENGOs are about 'awareness-raising, environmental education, research, and advocacy' (Ho, 2007, p. 29). However, most Chinese ENGOs have been cautious about getting involved in mobilizing large-scale social

movements against the government (Zhan & Tang, 2013). Therefore, Peter Ho (2007) has argued that the collective environmental activities in China are ‘specialized and media-attractive yet politically innocent’ (p. 29).

## 2.4.2 The embeddedness of China’s ENGOs and activists

Unlike how Western NGOs have played a key role in civil society, Chinese ENGOs have been ‘embedded’ in the institutional system with the feature of depoliticized (Ho, 2001, 2007a; G. Yang & Calhoun, 2007; Zhan & Tang, 2013). Having borrowed the notion of embedded social activism, Peter Ho (2007) has developed it to describe the setting and dynamics of China’s environmental activists and ENGOs in a semi-authoritarian context. The conception of embedded environmental activism refers to ‘a negotiated symbiosis between Party, state, and society’ (Ho, 2007, p. 37), and the Party-state has drawn certain boundaries to monitor and control ENGOs and activists. Given the embeddedness of environmental activism, Ho (2007) has thus argued that ENGOs and activists perform as a partners rather than adversaries of the Chinese government.

Besides, in the limited political space, Chinese ENGOs and activists are also facing other constraints to develop themselves. Compared with governmental-affiliated ENGOs, private ENGOs, especially grassroots ENGOs, have long been troubled with the issues of funding and media exposure (G. Yang, 2005). Moreover, due to the lack of organizational capacity and interest in policy advocacy (Lu, 2007), nearly all Chinese ENGOs can only engage in a limited range of activities, which mainly include public education, community building, research, and advocacy in a non-confrontational stance (G. Yang, 2005).

While political and financial resources are limited by the government, Chinese ENGOs have become more visible in public participation (Wang, 2015) and continually make contributions to China’s emerging civil society (Zhan & Tang, 2013). According to Yangzi Sima (2011), with the help of ICTs, Chinese ENGOs have made great efforts to empower disadvantaged people in their self-presentation, break the information monopoly, establish networks, mobilize campaigns, and construct discourse communities. Based on a long-term observation and two rounds of interviews, Zhan and Tang (2013) have concluded that Chinese ENGOs have

major progress in two areas in recent years. One that is through taking advantage of the conflicts and misalignments between the central and local governments, Chinese ENGOs have strategically enhanced their influence in the process of environmental policy-making. The other is that Chinese ENGOs have strengthened their societal connections by raising funds domestically and offering help to pollution victims. In some cases where the controversial projects were under the protection of the local authorities, Chinese ENGOs played a central role in tipping the balance by supporting the government's opponents (Yang & Calhoun, 2007).

### 2.4.3 Social media and networked environmental activism

Social media has become the dominant media landscape where environmental protests are performed in China. In the research field of online activism, a number of thorough studies have documented the prominent role of social media in processes such as information distribution, claims-making, identity solidarity, and social movement mobilization (Castells, 2015; Earl & Kimport, 2011; S. Grano, 2015; Highfield, 2017). Another newly emerged line of research has addressed the fact that affect is bound up with mobilizing activism on social media and has emphasized the importance of affective resonance in evoking collective action online (Brunner, 2017; Gerbaudo, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015; Prøitz, 2018).

The new affordances of digital communication technologies play an important role in affecting the forms of social organization and modes of users' perception and behaviour (Cox, 2015). In China, mobile technology and social media have become integral parts of environmental activism and advocacy campaigns. For example, to challenge information transparency, some Chinese grassroots ENGOs have initiated do-it-yourself (DIY) activism in multiple Chinese cities, which has encouraged volunteers to measure air quality, document air pollution data, and post images of testing results through their personal social media accounts (Xu, 2014). The result has been that the networked digital communication technologies are beneficial for people, especially grassroots and marginalized groups, in enhancing the visibility of environmental issues (Lester & Hutchins, 2012).

Another important line of research underlines the special phenomenon in China that ENGOs and environmental activists inevitably rely on personal social networks that

include friends, relatives, colleagues, neighbours, and others to mobilize resources for activism (Tang & Zhan, 2008; G. Yang, 2005). Xie Lei (2012) has added that these informal relations have played a critical role in ‘shaping collective identity, mobilizing coordinated actions and influencing political authorities to grant them access to useful information as well as political protection’ (p. 9). As J. Liu (2015) has identified, social networks have become a crucial factor in mobilizing social movements in China.

At the same time, scholars have commonly agreed that social media is not enough to achieve any significant political and social changes in Chinese society (Kay, Zhao, & Sui, 2015; Lee & Ho, 2014; Zhang & Shaw, 2015). If without support from mainstream media and temporary compromise made by the local government, Chinese activists are less likely to accomplish their goals (Grano, 2015). The reality in China is that most outcomes of environmental movements are questionable. Having reviewed many cases of urban environmental protests in China, Grano (2015) has lamented that almost all of the controversial projects resume immediately when the dissent has quieted down.

Although there have been extensive studies stating the significant role of mobile technologies and social media in empowering environmental activism in China, it is necessary to understand its myriad practices conducted by new tools and measures. So far, only a few scholars (Brunner, 2017; K. Deluca et al., 2016) have paid attention to the evolving methods of social media-facilitated environmental activism in the context of China; the impact of images and affective appeals on driving environmental activism has particularly been emphasized. However, scarce attention has been paid to investigating the content of visual materials created and circulated on social media to express affective appeals towards environmental issues to explore the impact of everyday visual practices on social media-dominated environmental activism in China.

## 2.5 Everyday visual practice as activism on China’s social media

The power of visual content has been clearly elucidated by the well-known proverb ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’. In contemporary society, everyday non-

professional photography has become a social and cultural documentary practice (Harrison, 2004). Due to the affective power and educative capacities of images, activists and NGOs around the world have long used them (Bogre, 2012). In the realm of environmental activism, Kevin Michael DeLuca (2012) has illustrated how ENGOs and activists create powerful images to undermine hegemonic values and meanings in social movements and has argued that images provide an alternative space for us to understand social movements deeply within the perspective of communication studies.

In the era of Web 2.0, new technologies and media have fundamentally changed the motivations for and methods of taking and sharing images (Van House, 2011). With the ubiquity of smart phone and social media in today's society, visual content has become a common but central component of people's everyday practices on social media. Smart phones provide technical support to record opportunistic photographs and videos, and social media platforms expand the scope of information circulation. According to social media scholars Highfield and Leaver (2016), visual practices on social media take a myriad of forms including 'selfies, looping media, infographics, memes, online videos, and more'. Although most of everyday visual social media practices have been primarily considered as banal (Koskinen, 2007), Highfield and Leaver (2016) have argued that they can be extraordinary in highlighting 'affect, political views, reactions, key information, and scenes of importance' (p. 48).

In recent years, an emerging body of studies has paid more attention to a range of everyday visual social media practices, but only a few are mentioned here (Barnard, 2016; Maniou & Veglis, 2016; Miguel, 2016; Miltner & Highfield, 2017; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017; Wiggins, 2019). Among many recent publications, scholars have progressively dealt with qualitative and quantitative analysis of visual social media practices within the theoretical framework of social movement (Gerbaudo, 2015; Kharroub & Bas, 2016; Seo, 2014). However, in online communication studies, there is still limited empirical research on the role that everyday visual social media practices play in environmental activism in the context of China. Therefore, this section introduces recent studies on the modes, dynamics, and roles of visual content involved in China's online activism.



## 2.5.1 Visual social media practices as citizen journalism

In today's visually oriented online environment, visual content has become an integral part of citizen journalism. Scholars have provided a body of studies on the role of visual content in non-professional photographers' documentation and distribution of information about crisis events. Based on a longitudinal qualitative study of notable crisis events in America, Liu, Palen, Sutton, Hughes, and Vieweg (2009) have stated that online photograph sharing can be 'informative, newsworthy, and even therapeutic' (p. 43) during times of disaster. In addition, having examined the 2011 Queensland floods, Hjorth and Burgess (2014) have argued that due to their emotional resonance and currency, images are more suitable and effective to express and convey people's complicated feelings than just written words.

Most visual content documented and spread on social media by amateurs in times of crisis events is eyewitness images, which makes citizen journalism more visible in several ways. Due to the phenomenon that eyewitness images from amateurs are increasingly adopted by mainstream media as formal disaster response, Hjorth and Burgess (2014) have argued that personal visual practice has been legitimated as important information and evidence for both the authorities and mainstream media. Concerning the characteristic of immediacy, Gaby David (2010) has emphasized that smart phone pictures and videos play a prominent role in informing, expanding, and probably moulding breaking news. Therefore, scholars (Sophia B Liu, Palen, Sutton, Hughes, & Vieweg, 2008) have proposed that the visual practices conducted by amateurs have significantly enhanced the visibility of citizen journalism on social media.

According to Nip (2009), the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in China was the first time Chinese citizen journalists enjoyed the freedom to report a disaster and question the government's culpability. In the aftermath, from a high-speed train crash in 2011 to the Tianjin explosions in 2015, several tragic events in China have demonstrated that taking photographs with smart phones and uploading to social media has become a common practice for citizens to capture an ongoing event (Han, 2016). Through analysing a series of crisis events in China, Chinese media scholar Jian Xu (2016) has concluded that there are three forms of Chinese citizen journalism in crisis

communication: ‘eyewitness reporting, online discussion and networking, and independent investigation projects’ (p. 54).

In the context of China, where the government tightly controls the mainstream news channels, many scholars have argued that the implications of citizen journalism have been considered more political. Jian Xu (2016) has emphasized that the watchdog function and public nature of citizen journalism in Chinese society are more prominent than in Western societies. Xin (2010) has revealed that citizen journalism does not only serve to supply news sources to the mainstream media but also provides an alternative channel for releasing politically sensitive information. Moreover, by studying the case of the 2015 Tianjin explosions, scholars (Zeng, Burgess, & Bruns, 2019) have discovered the unique phenomenon that citizen journalists play a role in refuting rumours and verifying information on Chinese social media. There are three findings about the political implications of citizen journalism in China: challenge the tight control of information flows, provide an alternative space for information circulation, and empower grassroots and marginalized groups (Chin-Fu, 2013; Reese & Dai, 2009; J. Xu, 2016; Yu, 2009).

## 2.5.2 Visual social media practices as playful resistance

Playfulness is one of the most prominent characteristics in China’s cyberspace (G. Yang & Jiang, 2015). Supported by digital technologies, a series of playful measures including humour, irony, satire, parody, and jokes have been embedded in various forms of online visual content. This kind of visual content has flourished in the Chinese online environment. If we consider de Certeau’s (1984) thoughts on everyday practice, we can understand that everyday visual practices on social media are infused with the spirit of creative resistance.

Recent studies have mainly examined the meanings and significance of playful online culture within the framework of hegemony and resistance (Bakhtin, 1984b; Hongmei Li, 2011; L. Tang & Bhattacharya, 2011; G. Yang, 2009). In the context of China, the creation of playful visual content is often understood as a communicative power and resisting strategy to internet censorship (Levine, 2012; Meng, 2011; Nordin & Richaud, 2014; Qiang, 2011; L. Tang & Yang, 2011). By taking advantage

of manipulation software, smart phones, and various apps, the playful visual content on social media mainly takes the form of multimedia remixes that include textual, audio, visual, and gaming materials (Yang & Jiang, 2015).

A number of studies have illustrated the prominence of internet memes in China's social media. According to Shifman (2014), an internet meme refers to 'a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which were created with awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via Internet by many users'. With 'rapid vitality, irreverent humour, [and] participatory culture' (p. 364), internet memes have become a popular vehicle often employed by Chinese activists to challenge the hegemonic media environment (Mina, 2014). For example, internet users create humorous parodies of existing issues in memes to mock the establishment (Szablewicz, 2014). In China, the well-circulated internet memes 'grass mud horse' (草泥马) and 'river crab'

(河蟹) have been used as outcry against China's strict internet censorship. In this sense, Fan Yang (2016) has stated that internet memes as a creative visual practice have potential to enhance the visibility of censored topics in Chinese cyberspace.

Moreover, creating memes about political leaders with both political and apolitical purposes has been a fever in the Chinese Internet for a few years. One of the most prominent examples is the 'toad meme', which refers to the meme of former Party and country leader Jiang Zemin. The toad meme has become a popular culture phenomenon called toad worship culture since 2014. On Chinese social media Weibo and WeChat, Jiang's numerous fans posted his memes with reciting his quotations to wish him all the best (Gracie, 2016). Through examining the toad worship culture, Kecheng Fang (2020) has reminded us that this sort of toad memes is coded by several meanings of political icons on both political and apolitical aspects. The most obvious political meaning is criticising the current leadership and uniting groups of dissidents. However, it also presents that growing number of people depoliticize a political figure as the memes are often shared purely for fun in a bonded community.

Another prominent playful visual practice on social media is culture jamming. As Jian Xu (2016) has noted, cultural jamming emerged as an important part of popular

internet culture in China in 2006. Through being infused with irony and parody, culture jamming has been adopted to criticize politics and energize acts of social and political activism in China (Jiang, 2016). More specifically, cultural jamming has helped ordinary Chinese in three ways: to articulate their dissent opinions, to intervene in official discourses, and to expose social injustice problems (Min Jiang, 2016; J. Xu, 2016). In addition, the existing studies have emphasized the important role of playful visual content in creating a sense of belonging and maintaining social ties (Gye, 2007). Laughter produced by playful visual content has been recognized as a key factor that can help stimulate ‘a strong fellow-feeling among participants and joint aggressiveness against outsiders’ (Lorenz, 2005, p. 253). Apart from laughter, L. Tang and Yang (2011) have argued that ‘the shared sentiments, emotions or experiences’ within the playful visual content can also resonate with the public. Inspired by participatory culture on social media, the process of production invites multiple individuals to work together online (Szablewicz, 2014; G. Yang & Jiang, 2015).

However, scholars have taken a cautious stance concerning the effectiveness of the everyday practices of playful resistance and have emphasized that it should not be overestimated. Although playful visual content is a novel way of resisting internet censorship and challenging the hegemony, it is impossible to bring any significant social and political change to Chinese society (Jiang, 2016). This is mainly because everyday visual practices on social media are not well-coordinated collective actions. Therefore, the government can still use a multilayered censorship system to remove these alternative voices (Li, 2011) and even implement real suppression of activists. Another important reason is the inequality of power distribution on the internet. Tang and Yang (2011) have stated that the visual voices of marginalized individuals and groups can only receive limited attention.

## 2.6 Affective turn and visual social media practices

The term ‘affective turn’ provides us with a new insight into social media and online activism. The very first question we may want to ask is why affect is necessary to the understanding of everyday politics on social media. Zizi Papacharissi (2015) has given the convincing answer that ‘affect presents a key part of how people internalize

and act on everyday experience' (p. 12). With the emerging movement of affective turn, scholars in media and cultural research have found a new way to examine how affect shapes online communication and the role of affect in the field of social movements. In examining the relationship between affect, visual content, and social media, this section aims to reflect on the preoccupation with affect in social media research.

So far, there are no universally accepted definitions of affect. Some theoretical frameworks have made efforts to underline distinctions between affect and emotion. In such frameworks, Crociani-Windland and Hoggett (2012, p. 164) have described affect as a 'bodily based and indeterminate level of experience', and Hochschild (2012) has outlined emotion as a complex and socially formed interplay of thoughts and feelings. However, since affect and emotion are often synonymous, some scholars have claimed that the distinctions are not necessary and emphasized that affect should be seen as part of emotions and consciousness (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Wetherell, 2012). Elizabeth Brunner (2017) has explained that affect is sometimes incorporated in emotion, and emotional responses are often elicited by affective experiences. Given the potential of iconic images in evoking an affective intersection, Lin Prøitz (2018) has also suggested that affect should be considered as part of emotions.

Media are 'affect generators' (Reckwitz, 2016), and social media is the place where affect and emotions are activated and expressed. The temporal dynamics and intensities of social media can be understood as 'affective flows' (Wetherell, 2012). In this sense, Zizi Papacharissi (2015) has emphasized that affect is a key component to examine and evaluate everyday practices on social media and elaborate on the ways social media facilitates political formations of affect. Therefore, Serrano-Puche (2015) has argued that social media has an important impact on modulating, playing out, and displaying affect.

In the realm of social movements, scholars have increasingly realized the necessity of drawing more academic attention to affect and collective actions on social media. Tracing the historical backdrop of social movement studies, affect and emotions were long associated with irrationality (Weber, 1978). However, the binary of affect and rationality limited scholars' attentions to the force of affect. Guattari and

Deleuze (2000) have argued that in reality, affect and rationality are not ambivalent, and pure rationality does not exist without passions. In this manner, Elizabeth Brunner (2017) has called for more academic interest in studying how affective appeals in visual content can drive collective activities on social media.

Recently, more related literature has emerged. Based on the case study of the image of Alan Kurdi, Lin Prøitz (2018) has demonstrated that iconic images circulated on social media are more likely to generate affective resonance and galvanize collect actions in young generations. In the context of China, Elizabeth Brunner (2017) has found that images of violence and coalescing bodies productively moved local residents in Maoming to join the anti-PX environmental protest. However, compared with other networked approaches to social movement, not enough studies have incorporated affect yet.

In regards to the relationship between affect, visual content, and social media, inspired by Sara Ahmed (2013)'s work, Lin Prøitz (2018) has suggested that we understand affect and emotions as serving as a form of capital that helps particular narratives, stories, and images to increase in power by being articulated and repeated via social media. As an amplifier and modulator of affect, the infrastructure of storytelling on a social media platform provides 'affective publics' with a place to develop their stories through sharing opinions, facts, feelings, and self-performance (Papacharissi, 2016).

## 2.7 Conclusion

This chapter mainly reviews the existing studies on the birth and development of networked environmental activism in China. The chapter began with literature concerning China's environmental governance, which shed light on the unique characteristics of Chinese environmental activism. With the ubiquity of social media and digital technologies, Chinese NGOs and activists have transformed the space for fighting for environmental justice from the streets to a virtual space. Although scholars hold opposite positions on whether social media could bring democracy to Chinese society, one thing is certain: social media is the only channel for public participation in China.

China's internet environment is full of stringent internet censorship, but much research has demonstrated that this censorship cannot put an end to resistance. In fact, Chinese netizens have begun to adopt a variety of digital technologies to actively articulate their opinions concerning public events. This chapter therefore elaborated on the complexity of the multilayered internet censorship system and its impact on networked environmental activism.

In order to gain a better understanding of China's environmental governance and the role of visual social media practices in environmental participation, this chapter compared the differences in the roles of ENGOs and the use of social media in Chinese and Western societies. Simultaneously, the comparison highlighted the commonalities in making ordinary people's voices more audible by exploiting the advantages of technologies in different contexts, such as pervasively adopting visual content to express and affect in order to mobilize collective actions.

In addition, through examining the related research, this chapter has drawn the basic boundaries of this PhD study. However, it has also found some gaps that need to be filled. There is not much research that illuminates how networked environmental activism incorporates affect and emotions to mobilize collective actions in China, what affect and emotions are incorporated, how Chinese environmental activists galvanize public resonance by everyday visual practices on social media, and what is the impact of affect and emotions on China's environmental activism. In the following chapters, this study attempts to address these research gaps.

# Chapter 3 Citizen Journalism as Storytelling: A Case Study of the 2015 Tianjin Explosions

‘Everyone is a witness. Everyone is a journalist. Everyone edits.’  
Matthew Arnison (2002)

## 3.1 Introduction

### 3.1.1 The 2015 Tianjin explosions

On the night of 12 August 2015, two massive explosions erupted from a chemical warehouse owned by Ruihai International Logistics, killing hundreds of people and causing severe damage to the Tianjin seaport and nearby residential areas in Tianjin Binhai New Area (TBNA), China (The Guardian, 2015). Unlike other catastrophes far from boom cities, the Tianjin explosions occurred very close to the middle-class neighbourhoods in one of the most prosperous cities, which is only a 30-minute ride from Beijing by high-speed train. Tianjin Binhai New Area, a prosperous economic development area with a population of 2.98 million that emerged in recent years, was established by China’s state council around one of busiest seaports in 2009. The news report from China Daily (2012) shows that through growth in prominence as a hub supplying goods to Beijing and north China, TBNA contributed more than half of the GDP to the Tianjin municipality, and that petrochemicals are one of TBNA’s pillar industries. Yixiu Wu, a campaigner for Greenpeace, attributed the reason for the disaster to ‘local governments ... putting economic growth first’ (Jacobs, Hernandez, & Buckley, 2015).

The Tianjin explosions were one of the worst human-induced industrial disasters in contemporary China. Despite China having a terrible record of industrial safety, the whole nation was stunned after watching the dramatic videos captured by eyewitnesses on social media. Thirty-nine weeks pregnant at that time, Interviewee XC experienced a difficult evacuation the night of the explosions and describes the scenes she went through like a Hollywood disaster movie. On 5 February 2016,



China's state council released an investigation report saying that this disaster was the result of mismanagement (Hernández, 2016). According to Xinhua (2016), the state news agency, the 2015 Tianjin explosions took 165 lives, devastated more than 300 buildings, left nearly 800 people injured, and caused \$.1 billion USD in damages. The initial explosion at the Tianjin seaport had a power equivalent to the blast of 15 tonnes of trinitrotoluene (TNT), and the second one was equivalent to the blast of 430 tonnes of TNT. According to this report, the main reason that caused the massive explosions is that the Ruihai chemical warehouse stored hazardous chemical materials improperly. More importantly, the distance between the Ruihai chemical warehouse and three local large residential complexes is less than 1 km despite government regulations clearly stating that such facilities should be at least 1 km from public places (Phillips, 2015).

The massive environmental disaster evoked large-scale citizen journalism practices on social media platforms. With the help of ICTs, ordinary people are no longer satisfied to seek information from news media or emergency agencies; they are more active in providing information through internet and social media platforms in times of crises (Palen & Liu, 2007). In the aftermath of the Tianjin explosions, many local residents and volunteers recorded and uploaded numerous images to social media platforms by using their smartphones. A cartoon named "the world's coolest retrograde" (see Figure 3.1) went viral on Weibo in a short time, due to it triggered Chinese citizens' affect and emotions towards the sacrificed young firefighters. It was reposted more than 517,000 times, attracting more than 438,000 likes and 72,000 comments. This cartoon evokes Chinese citizens' resonance of respect to firemen and regret of their sacrifice.

Meanwhile, due to lack of information and people's distrust towards the government, rumours began to be prevalent on Chinese social media as a side effect of the disaster. In order to maintain social and political stability after explosions, the propaganda department saliently strengthened control and censorship on both news media and social media. In such circumstances, local residents saw the opportunity to establish alternative news publications by conducting citizen journalism. Through citizen journalism practices, ordinary Chinese were able to highlight social concerns,

organize relief activities, defend rights, and construct personal and collective memories.



**Figure 3.1 A screenshot about the Weibo post of the cartoon uploaded on 13th August 2015. The caption is, “The world’s coolest retrograding”.**

### 3.1.2 Finding participants

In September 2016, one month after the one-year anniversary of the Tianjin explosions, I went to TBNA (also called Tanggu), China to investigate how local residents utilized social media with visual features in response to the 2015 Tianjin explosions by conducting fieldwork. However, because the topic was still highly sensitive in China when I conducted the fieldwork, gaining access to interviewees who were blast victims or local residents at the time of the Tianjin explosions proved to be more difficult than anticipated. There was never any reply after I sent a brief self-introduction, research introduction, and interview invitation via the message function on Weibo to people who engaged in discussions of the Tianjin explosions. At the same time, a friend is a journalist who reported on the Tianjin explosions in China invited me to join a WeChat group called ‘group of media and property owners’ (媒体业主群). This group was created to exchange information between affected house owners and journalists working in domestic or international media. Again, I was rejected when I tried to connect with the blast victims in the group.

Many people were worried that it might cause potential political risk if they accepted interviews with a PhD student with an overseas educational background.

After failing in contacting people via Chinese social media, I changed my strategy of recruiting participants. Using my personal connections and the method of snowballing was the only possible way to recruit enough participants in this politically sensitive case. Besides, through reading relevant materials such as blogs and media reports, I also found some clues that two people with professional backgrounds could contribute their experiences to my research and enrich the variety of the interview samples. During the fieldwork in Tianjin, some interviewees kindly introduced their friends or neighbours to me to help me complete the data collection for the 2015 Tianjin explosions. Due to the ethics requirements, all interviewees are anonymous in this chapter, and the demographic information is listed in Table 3.1. All the interviewees were very open and helpful when interviewed, and their contributions to this research are appreciated. Even though the online debates about the Tianjin explosions have faded out and parts of the visual materials are gone due to being censored by authorities or deleted voluntarily by users, there are still plenty of images left on social media or archived privately that deserved to be explored.

**Table 3.1 List of interviewees**

#	Name	Age	Gender	Occupation
1	PS.Z	38	M	Consultant
2	W.M	34	M	Manager
3	T.Z	28	F	Designer
4	D.Z	27	F	Translator
5	XC.L	32	F	Lab engineer
6	X.Z	36	M	Self-employed
7	J.C	45	M	Photojournalist
8	GB.Z	23	M	NGO staff
9	YL.W	35	M	Sales
10	YF.W	31	M	Logistics business

This chapter mainly seeks to address how local residents utilized citizen journalism as a visual social media practice to produce alternative information through social media in the aftermath of an environmental disaster in China, a country where news media are tightly controlled by the government. As an alternative crisis

communication, citizen journalism has been recognized as major online activism that challenges official discourses in times of crisis or disaster in China (Xu, 2016). In this chapter, based on the data collection, I suggest that networked ordinary Chinese have adopted storytelling as a newly emerged form of citizen journalism to produce alternative information in an affective way through social media in order to break the monopoly of information by the government and enhance the visibility of ordinary people's voice online.

The chapter is divided into four main sections. It begins with a background introduction to the rise of citizen journalism on China's internet and then analyses its peculiar Chinese characteristics in crisis communication. Since WeChat has been prominently used in this case, the second section focuses on exploring how and why ordinary Chinese prefer to use a relatively closed platform to distribute first-hand reporting of news stories as a peer-to-peer communication strategy in times of disaster, especially when the topic is politically sensitive. Based on the conceptual framework of affective news stories by Papacharissi (2015), apart from presenting four examples provided by interviewees, the third section also illustrates what content of news stories was produced and circulated during the period from the aftermath of explosions to the one-year anniversary and explores how people who were more or less involved in the explosions turned an environmental disaster into a variety of stories based on their first-hand experiences at the scene. To highlight more political, social, and cultural meanings behind those amateur news stories and the affective turn that occurred in alternative crisis communication in China, the last section does not merely analyse what news values drive people to produce affective news stories, but also discusses how those citizen journalists played a role of gatewatcher in producing and disseminating the information of an environmental disaster.

## 3.2 Chinese characteristics of citizen journalism in times of crisis

### 3.2.1 Chinese characteristics of crisis communication

The major focus of this chapter is on how local people conducted citizen journalism to respond to a public crisis in the case of the 2015 Tianjin explosions. According to Fearn-Banks (2011, p. 2), crisis communication refers to ‘dialog between the organization and its public(s) prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence. The dialog details strategies and tactics designed to minimize damage to the image of the organization’. Fearn-Banks (2011) has also pointed out that as a part of crisis management, effective crisis communication can reduce or eliminate the negative influences caused by crises. From the government’s perspective, when people’s lives and property are at risk due to a disaster, crisis communication is critical in order to release timely and accurate information, reduce social panic, and maintain social and political stability (Xu, 2016). However, although the Chinese government has made progress in improving the openness of its information system, China’s media have rarely reported news in times of crisis.

In the context of China, mass media have served as an agent of maintaining social and political stability to meet the Party’s needs, especially in times of crisis (Chin-Fu, 2013), rather than playing an important role in filling the information gap between the government and the public. In reality, local media organizations are not allowed to report facts in times of critical events unless they can get the permission from the propaganda departments at upper levels (Chen, 2008). Therefore, there has long been criticism – from both inside and outside the country – of China’s mass media’s lack of transparency, timeliness, and accountability (A. P. Liu, 1971; Su, 1994), although news coverage still carries some basic functions of information and surveillance in times of crisis (Chen, 2008).

The severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic in 2003 is one of the most representative cases that validate this criticism. When SARS broke out as a small-scale local disease in Guangzhou at the end of 2002, the government misled the public with false information, refused to publish the exact number of infected people, and exerted tight control over media reports (Yu, 2007). Eventually, the SARS epidemic had not merely swept through the whole country but had also become a cross-border pandemic. Lidan Chen (2008) has pointed out that the government did not act transparently or accountably due to its conventional practice of minimizing the exposure of negative information. Jian Xu (2016) has noted that the logic behind

such practices was that the government was worried that the negative news may trigger large-scale social chaos.

The conventional mode of crises communication may cause the delay of information flow between the public, news media, and government departments (Chen, 2008). According to the official policies and regulations, an important principle of reporting public crises in China is that all coverage to the outside world must be approved by the Central Propaganda Department and directly managed by the responsible authorities, with the news reports centrally released by the Xinhua News Agency (CCP-CPD, 1994). Apart from the case of SARS, this could also explain why interviewees complained that they could not find any effective information from local TV channels shortly after the explosions. As a result, the information gap in the early stage of the explosions triggered local residents' desire to fill the gap through constantly posting their first-hand experiences on social media. Furthermore, because the information cannot be sufficiently disseminated in the disaster area, rumours are always spread quickly and spin out of control.

The SARS epidemic in 2003 has become a turning point of reforming the conventional mode of crisis communication in China (Xu, 2016). According to Chen (2008), the central government has been more proactive in establishing an open information system since 2003. A number of related regulatory documents were slowly released. In January 2006, the State Council published a National Emergency Response Plan,<sup>4</sup> which marked the establishment of a new open information system for handling different types of emergency incidents. In August 2007, the Emergency Response Law was passed, which offers a comprehensive framework for government departments to institutionalize crisis management and crisis communication. However, although the government has made more efforts to improve media operations, the conventional mode has not been completely abandoned and the entanglement of proactive and repressive approaches still effectively limits the information flow in times of crisis. With the emergence and rise of citizen journalism in China, social media and mobile technologies help non-professional journalists spread information and break the monopoly dominated by state-run media and Chinese people are able to obtain more information that they could not reach before.

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<sup>4</sup> See [http://www.gov.cn/yjgl/2006-01/08/content\\_21048.htm](http://www.gov.cn/yjgl/2006-01/08/content_21048.htm).

In this sense, the rise of citizen journalism in the context of China represents a bottom-up form of crisis communication.

### 3.2.2 The rise of citizen journalism in China

In today's society, citizen journalism has become an integral part of news gathering and delivery (Wall, 2015). However, although scholars have provided a variety of definitions for the term 'citizen journalism' (Glaser, 2006; Goode, 2009; J. Y. Nip, 2006; Stuart, 2009), there is not a certain one that has been agreed upon. From a general perspective, it consists of a wide range of internet-based journalistic practices that ordinary people engage in (Goode, 2009). In order to describe the phenomenon of amateur news reporting in detail in an environmental disaster, I have adopted a relatively specific definition of citizen journalism, which is 'the act of a citizen, or a group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information ... [in order to] provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires' (Bowman & Willis, 2003, p. 9).

The reason for the rise of citizen journalism in Chinese society is mainly attributed to the government, which has persistently implemented intricate information control and censorship on China's news media and internet (Chin-Fu, 2013; Xin, 2010; Xu, 2016). This is totally different from Western societies, where the rise of citizen journalism in democratic countries has occurred due to the long-term financial crisis and technological challenges that the news industry is facing (Lievrouw, 2011). As previously mentioned, China's regulations and laws have limited the possibilities for news media to be transformed into a genuine watchdog. However, through the development of ICTs, ordinary Chinese have obtained the ability to intervene in and transform the top-down official crisis communication by delivering crafted messages to a precise public much faster than traditional methods can.

Similar to Western societies, recent technological developments are the crucial driving force of the rise of citizen journalism in China, and citizen journalism is particularly prevalent in times of crisis. By conducting journalistic practices on the internet, ordinary users become not merely consumers but simultaneously also producers of news. Citizen journalism emerged in Western countries in the late

1990s (Bruns, 2018) and then became noticeable during the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 and prominent during the South Asian tsunami in 2004 (Outing, 2005). According to J. Y. M. Nip (2009), the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008 was the first time that Chinese amateur journalists provided on-the-ground eyewitness reports of a disaster through online communication networks. At that time, Chinese citizen journalism primarily took place on online forums and blogs. By using digital and mobile technologies, ordinary Chinese are thus able to constantly upload news images and stories on the internet and successfully evoke large-scale interactions among audiences online.

With the advent of Web 2.0, ordinary Chinese are empowered to establish alternative voices and make them reach as many audiences as mainstream media can. Mobile technologies and social media do not merely lower the barriers for ordinary people to participate in citizen journalism practices but also increasingly provide people with an open, prompt, and interactive platform to circulate, exchange, and debate their opinions about public events. Without a doubt, social media enable citizens to engage in first-hand reporting on ongoing events immediately on the ground. In China, citizen journalists have played a more significant role in bringing first-hand breaking news to audiences than mainstream media have in a series of public crises in recent years. It has become a common phenomenon that amateur materials are adopted as important original news sources by the state-run news media in China. Antony and Thomas (2010) have noted that through engaging in various forms of participatory publishing via social media, such as posts and image-sharing, people without professional journalism training are able to subvert the ‘vertical, top-down, passive, one-way flow of information’ (Birdsall, 2007, p. 2) from traditional media and set agendas themselves. As a result, these alternative discourses can be manifested before the public.

While most of Western social media have been blocked in China, Chinese people still have plenty of social media platforms tailored by local internet companies. In recent years, with the evolution of social media, Weibo (a Twitter-like microblog) and WeChat (an instant messaging app attached to a variety of affordances) have become two leading social media platforms that amateur journalists use to distribute the news content in China. For example, on 23 July 2011, two high-speed trains



collided in Wenzhou, a southeast coastal city in China, killing 40 people and injuring more than 200 people (Han, 2017). According to Wines and LaFraniere (2011), within 10 minutes following the train crash, some passengers at the scene had already posted a few messages to report the collision on Weibo. Although they were short and fragmented, these first-hand reporting messages successfully attracted nation-wide attention to the collision on Weibo. However, due to the crackdown on Weibo launched by the government in December 2013, Chinese social media users have gradually shifted to the relatively closed and private platform WeChat (Svensson, 2014).

Based on the interviews, I found that almost all interviewees in this case used WeChat as the only platform to distribute and disseminate their affective news stories of the 2015 Tianjin explosions, though Weibo has also played an important role in circulating disaster information. Therefore, to offer a better understanding of the choice made by interviewees, the following section discusses this remarkable phenomenon of migration as a change of peer-to-peer communication strategies in times of crisis and disaster in China.

### 3.3 WeChat as a platform for news storytelling

Unlike other environmental incidents that previously occurred in China, interviewees involved in the 2015 Tianjin explosions prominently used WeChat as their primary social media platform to distribute information. In previous cases, such as a series of anti-PX projects in different Chinese cities, people normally chose Weibo to fight for environmental justice due to its openness and capability of stirring nationwide debate. Although the private features have constrained people to different small groups and limited the possibility that information could be circulated with nation-wide influence like on Weibo, WeChat successfully creates a closely connected social ecosystem where pluralistic interests can be presented and coexist (Tu, 2016). According to the interviews, at the time of the explosions, some features of WeChat have provided local people with the opportunity to exchange information and news and organize and mobilize collective actions that could address issues of local community concern, despite WeChat mainly being designed for personal and entertainment uses. With versatile functions that are constantly developed, it seems

that WeChat has provided local people with a one-stop service in this case. Given the highly political sensitivity of this event, using WeChat instead of Weibo can be recognized as a new individual communicative strategy to fill information gaps and highlight alternative voices in times of disaster.

Not limited to this case, Chinese social media users have used WeChat more frequently than Weibo in daily life. The external reason for many users' migration to WeChat is the decline of Weibo. Since Weibo had played more and more important role in facilitating public participation, the government has considered it the main battlefield for maintaining the country's ideological security (J. Y. Nip & Fu, 2016). During the summer of 2013, in response to 'rumours' about Weibo, the Chinese government launched its largest crackdown in years. A judicial clause released in September 2013 meant that people can be charged for defamation if their slanderous posts are read by 5,000 or more users or reposted 500 times or more (Mu, 2013). In this crackdown, opinion leaders and Big Vs (verified microbloggers with huge followings) became the targets (Svensson, 2014). They were not merely invited to publicize the official line of propaganda via their accounts; some critical microbloggers were arrested for spreading rumours or charged with other criminal offences (J. Y. Nip & Fu, 2016). Svensson (2014) once stated that the most prominent impact that Weibo has had Chinese society is that it has enabled ordinary Chinese to share their sentiments and opinions in public. However, there is no doubt that the crackdown did not merely stifle the progress of China's civil society in the cradle; it also hastened the migration from Weibo to WeChat.

In addition, Weibo's commercial strategy that largely privileges a certain group of users keeps ordinary Chinese's voices on the margins. Apart from state control and censorship, the commercial strategy is also an important force that guides speech and connectivity on China's social media (Svensson, 2014). To boost its popularity and compete with other Chinese social media companies, Weibo privileges a certain group of influential individuals by the verification procedure called 'Big Vs' (Wang, She, & Chen, 2014). This verification scheme is actually based on the real-name registration system for Chinese internet users. Through identifying the genuineness of users' accounts and adding a capitalized letter 'V' alongside the user name, Weibo has offered the endorsement of official credit and trustworthiness and a special status

to influential people such as celebrities, opinion leaders, journalists, public intellectuals, scholars, organizations, and so on. With huge numbers of followers on Weibo, this group of certain users has thus obtained more impact when discussing public events and promoting social issues. It has become a common phenomenon that marginalized people seek Big Vs' help to defend their rights by addressing them with @username in their posts. In contrast, due to limited social network resources, ordinary users' voices are difficult to hear unless they are creative or strategically take advantage of the platform (Svensson, 2014).

One internal reason for the transition to WeChat is that it provides a highly private environment, which ensures that users have a comparatively safe channel to exchange information and mobilize collective actions. Based on the case study of the Maoning anti-PX protest in China, Lee and Ho (2014) have found that WeChat is comparatively free from censorship in contrast with other social media platforms. Although the Chinese government has paid more attention to governing WeChat, the statistics show that 16.25% of posts are censored on Weibo (Bamman, O'Connor, & Smith, 2012), but only 1.5% of posts from public accounts were censored by the authorities and 2.44% of posts were self-censored on WeChat (Tu, 2016). Tu (2016) has also noted that censorship on WeChat mainly focuses on public accounts, and users still have a plenty of ways to bypass it. It is fair to say that the private environment on WeChat reduces the potential political risks for users, and they are able to enjoy a certain degree of freedom of expression on the platform. As a result, in the wake of explosions, local residents chose WeChat as a primary platform to organize, mobilize, and coordinate collective actions to defend their rights. For example, Interviewee YL joined a couple of WeChat groups immediately upon invitations from his neighbours, whose properties were damaged to different extents, in order to be united to defend their rights. According to his recollection, group members actively uploaded a variety of pictures and videos as evidence gathered for the purpose of negotiating compensation with the local government.

The reinforced sense of community shaped by more intensive and exclusive social ties on WeChat is another important internal reason for interviewees to choose this platform. Centola and Macy (2007) have argued that a tighter social network is conducive to circulating information more effectively despite the speed and scale

being limited by the relatively closed environment on WeChat. In fact, acquaintance is the key element that constructs the connections on WeChat. According to the concept of ‘acquaintance society’ raised by the pioneering Chinese sociologist and anthropologist Xiaotong Fei (1992), in Chinese society, peoples’ relationships go through close friends to form connections with each other, they prefer to get to know other people through familiar people’s introduction, and they rely on acquaintances more than strangers when doing social activities. In the context of China, acquaintance always links to the word *guanxi* (关系), which can be translated as ‘relation’ or ‘personal connections’ in English. Beyond the literal meaning, *guanxi* implies intangible emotional attachments like trust, reliability, and intimacy (J. Liu, 2015). During the period of The Tianjin explosions, relying on his social network on WeChat, Interviewee PS successfully recruited more than 30 volunteers, initiated donations for blast victims through Moments, and organized and coordinated voluntary work in the WeChat group he established after the explosions.

After the Tianjin explosions, when other social media platforms were under heavy censorship and the mass media were not trusted, WeChat afforded local residents a more free space to exchange information, publish (reliable) news, and organize collective actions. Although the speed and scale of information dissemination on WeChat is in question, it still has potential to allow information to easily traverse the overlapping networks and go viral in a short time (Harwit, 2017). In such circumstances, WeChat quickly rises to prominence and facilitates the dissemination of information in times of crisis. Based on the interviews, I found that the relatively safe and reliable environment with storytelling infrastructure on WeChat Moments provides ordinary Chinese with an ideal platform to share how local residents experienced the disaster, and such content is less likely to be seen on China’s mainstream media. To illustrate the content of the news stories and the intention behind, the next section presents and analyses a number of representative examples provided by the interviewees.

### 3.4 Samples of affective news stories

According to the WeChat posts provided by interviewees, they prominently produced news stories by conducting citizen journalism practices to describe what they

experienced at the scenes after the explosions. The common nature of these samples is that the tone of the stories is affective. Similar to the tweets studied by Papacharissi (2015) in the case of the 2011 Egypt uprising, the affective news stories in this case also mixed ‘emotion with opinion and drama with fact’, which ‘reflect[ed] deeply subjective accounts and interpretation of events as they unfolded’ (p. 56). By adopting both textual and visual narratives, local residents produced and circulated particular feelings in their affective news stories to trigger resonance among their social networks.

In this section, four selected samples might be helpful to illustrate what particular feelings local residents were conveying and to consider how they turned a massive disaster into a variety of affective news stories in this case. In addition, by analysing when the news stories were being told, we have found that all collected visual data was updated in three different stages. Therefore, this section also traces the progression of the news stories over one year’s time in order to illustrate a whole picture of what the prominent broadcasting tendencies are in this case.

### 3.4.1 A continued story of a certificate

On the evening of 12 August 2015, around 11:00 PM, Interviewee PS.Z saw that a few pieces of fragmented visual information about the explosions, such as footage and pictures, were posted by his friends in his WeChat friend circle who were living in TBNA. PS had worked and lived with his family in TBNA for many years. Later, he moved to Tianjin city because of work changes, but he still kept two properties, which are located in one of the three most affected residential complexes near the blast site and were badly damaged in the explosions. According to the visual content, PS.Z confirmed the authenticity of the information and the severity of the explosions. To check the damage on their properties, he and his wife decided to go to TBNA overnight. At the same time, they also prepared some emergency supplies to help the local victims.

The next morning, PS.Z uploaded a picture of a certificate (see Figure 3.1) to WeChat when he found it lying on the floor with glass shards from one of his properties. This certificate belongs to his neighbour, a primary school student. In the post, the attached caption said, *‘Hi little friend Zhuang Zimo, are you staying safe? I*

will keep the certificate for you'. One year later, on the first anniversary of the explosions, PS.Z posted the picture of the certificate on WeChat again and developed the story as a commemoration of the explosions (see Figure 3.2):

*'On the morning of 13th August last year, I picked up a certificate at the messy corridor in the residential complex Jinyu Lanwan, one kilometre away from the blast site. Afterwards, I entrusted a coach who is working at the football club that Zhuang Zimo participates in to help me pass it on to him.'*

In the interview, PS.Z explained what factors drove him to document the certificate and circulate the story:

*'I did that based on affective factors. Certificate is a kind of honour. Innocent children attach more importance to this spiritual thing than adults do, but this certificate ended up on the staircase. This scene reminds people that there must have been a panic situation so that this highly-valued certificate which would have been placed in the most important position was trampled under feet. This was a radical change in spirit and emotion, so I was shocked at that time. I posted this in the moments to remember the chaos, while at the same time hoping to find the owner of this certificate, to alleviate the suffering coming with the explosion, to get people back on their normal track. In addition, this certificate was finally given back to its little owner, which was a spiritual comfort for me.'*

As the government exerted tight control, China's news media was quiet on the one-year anniversary. During the interviews, not only PS.Z but also other interviewees noted that the topic had gradually faded out in the public as time went by. *'This tragedy should not be completely forgotten. It should be recalled at an appropriate time if it has been forgotten, in order to avoid it would be happened again.'* PS.Z explained the purpose of furthering the story he believes to be meaningful and sharing it with his social network at a special time.



Figure 3.2 (left) A screenshot of PS.Z’s WeChat friend circle from 13 August 2015.

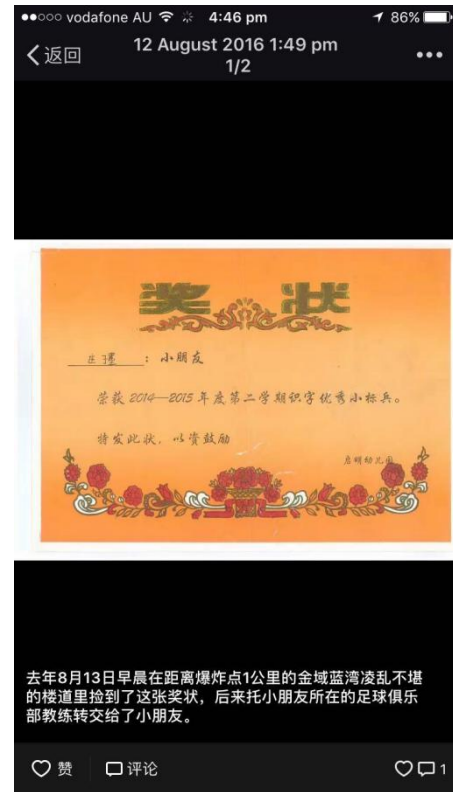


Figure 3.3 (right) A screenshot of PS.Z’s WeChat friend circle from 12 August 2016.

### 3.4.2 A story of firefighters

A short time after the Tianjin explosions, several widespread images of firefighters resulted in various public and official responses on both Weibo and WeChat. According to a news report (The Guardian, 2015), a total of 104 young firefighters were killed in this disaster, and some of them were only 19 years old. Numerous posts praising the firefighters’ efforts flooded China’s social media platforms. For example, a cartoon of a firefighter moving against a tide of people to reach to the blast site posted on Weibo with the hashtag #TheWorldsMostHandsomeRetrograde went viral in a short time. It was reposted more than 700,000 times, attracting more than 57,000 comments and 300,000 likes in a few hours (Dwyer & Xu, 2015). At the same time, a screenshot of the message exchange on WeChat between one unnamed fireman and his friend has been shared thousands of times on Chinese social media (Chiu, 2015). This conversation happened before the firefighter was heading to the blast site, and in it, he asked his friends to ‘visit my mother’s grave’ (BBC, 2015).

However, amid the praise, there was a voice to question how the Tianjin explosions were handled.

Feng, a 31-year-old local resident in TBNA, joined a local voluntary association the day after the Tianjin explosions. In the period of being a volunteer, he was in charge of logistics including distributing food and managing medicines; therefore, he had contact with firefighters and observe their working routine. Late at night on 14 August 2015, two days after the explosions, Feng documented and posted a picture of an empty fire station he saw when he was on his way to do voluntary work. In this post, Feng shared a conversation between himself and a firefighter to express his gratitude to these heroes (see Figure 3.3):

*Have you seen the sentry box at the left bottom in the picture? There is a firefighter who did not go to the blasted site. He does not switch on the light and was sitting there in the dark alone. I asked him if he needs any relief goods. He said no, and thanked us with bowing to salute and folding his hands. Can you imagine how sad he felt like when he was talking? You really cannot understand how heartbroken I was when I saw these firemen (heartbroken emoji). Thank these great firemen, you are the most lovely people. You are the security assurance for people in Tianjin, and people in Tianjin are your reliable family!*

In the interview, Feng explained that what he saw about how firefighters work on the spot was the main thing that caused him to focus on publishing the firefighters' story:

*'Many of them died at the blast site when the explosions happened, so I paid much attention on these firefighters ... When I was being a volunteer, the fire stations I went were already empty. No fire trucks, no firefighters. It was a difficult feeling when I saw no one else was in the building ... I was deeply moved by them. It was not an easy job for them ... The firefighters I saw are all kids, much younger than me.'*



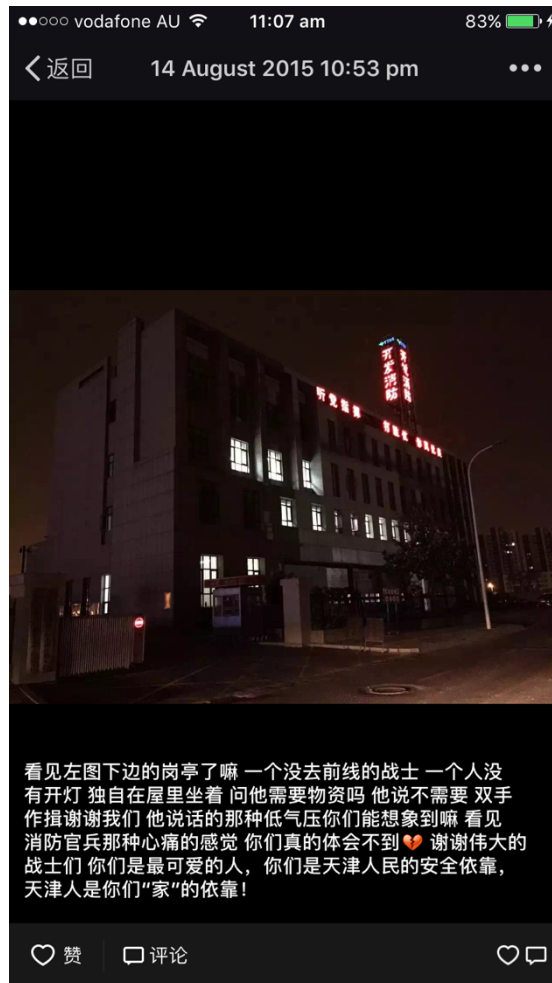


Figure 3.4 A screenshot of Feng’s WeChat post updated on 14 August 2015.

### 3.4.3 A story of the city in the aftermath of the explosions

The massive chemical explosions led to the whole city being enveloped by harmful air pollutants for a while. Numerous local residents escaped from the severe pollution to other places, and the interviewee Wei was one of them. On 16 August 2015, four days after the explosions, he settled his family in a neighbouring city and came back home to collect some belongings. On the way to his apartment by car, he saw that the once-prosperous city had become an empty one. There were only a few of cars parked on the streets, and some buildings did not have any lights on. The post-explosions scenes impressed Wei, so he took six pictures of the residential complex he was living in and immediately posted them on WeChat (see Figure 3.4). When I interviewed him at his office in TBNA, he could still clearly remember what he posted that day. In his post, he described a story to share the scenes of the city after the explosions with people:

*In the aftermath of explosions, Tanggu has become an empty city. After four days have passed, what does Tanggu look like now? It is recovering gradually. This is my home – Xinzijingangyun residential area – about five kilometres away from the blasted site. The occupancy rate is about 30 percentage. You can come back if you are bold enough.*



**Figure 3.5 A screenshot of Wei’s WeChat post updated on 16 August 2015.**

### 3.4.4 A story of the one-year anniversary

On the one-year anniversary of the Tianjin explosions, some interviewees spontaneously updated stories in WeChat to commemorate the disaster. Though a year had passed, the topic of the 2015 Tianjin explosions was still politically sensitive in China. Apart from the memorial ceremony held by the local government, the authorities muted other tributes and relevant media reports (BBC, 2016). The

quiet performance on mainstream media somewhat increased this decline of public attention. In this circumstance, some interviewees attempted to break the quiet and enhance the visibility of it in public by posting and circulating the news stories among personal social networks.

On 12 August 2016, the interviewee Feng took a picture of a badly damaged clock tower in front of a railway station in TBNA (see Figure 3.5), which is 500 or 600 meters away from the blast site, and then posted it in his WeChat Moments to mourn the young people who lost their lives in the explosions. In his new story, he described the details of the clock tower he observed to remind people not to forget:

*How time flies. A year just gone. Although this clock tower is being demolished, the time indicated by the clock pointers is fixed forever, 23.32 pm. Although the disaster is not reported by the media nor mentioned by the government anymore, people in Tianjin will never forget those lives that have been taken on this land. Gratitude. Commemoration. May they rest in peace.*



Figure 3.6 Screenshot of Feng’s WeChat post updated on 12 August 2016.

### 3.4.5 Three visual information flows

In this case study, local residents prominently made contributions to create news-oriented content in the form of storytelling based on their first-hand experiences. These non-professional journalists turned their digital cameras on capturing historical moments, which provide not merely a kind of personal document but also the local residents' draft of history of Tianjin explosions in 2015. The visual journalistic practice has been done in this case is quite similar to citizen photojournalism. On one hand, the citizen-created eyewitness images show a crisis-driven paradigm and were used to tell the public about the stories of what have transpired on the spot. With strongly amateur aesthetics, these images provided an unforeseen scene of the explosions and an alternative channel of information to the public. On the other hand, different with citizen photojournalism, the storytelling within the form of citizen journalism is text-based with images rather than pure visual rhetoric. In this case, the texts supplied more emotional details which cannot be delivered by the images. It is fair to say that text plays an equally important role as image in provoking people's affect and emotions.

Although the voluntary and unpaid nature prevents interviewees from engaging in intensive or regular first-hand news reporting (Bruns, 2018), the proactive engagement by local residents formed three visual information flows of citizen reporting of the 2015 Tianjin explosions on WeChat friend circles. The three information flows occurred separately at different stages in time, and the timespan was one year.

The earliest resources of visual information following the Tianjin explosions that emerged on WeChat were the images that captured the moments of the explosions. Although this flow lasted for a short time and could not provide sufficient content to meet people's demands, these eyewitness images of the explosions' impact immediately provided updates and evoked national discussions about the explosions. After watching the videos, thousands of people began to organize offline citizen-side voluntarily activities on social media, particularly on WeChat. According to the interviews, some people prominently reposted and circulated the information in order to expand the influence of the explosions on social media, though none of the interviewees captured such images. On WeChat, interviewees did not merely repost

the related information via Moments but also forwarded it to different groups they were in to expand the influence as broadly as they could.

Due to the sudden onset and short impact of the first flow, the content of information in the earliest flow was limited and mainly about the impact of the incident. Scholars (S. B. Liu, Palen, Sutton, Hughes, & Vieweg, 2008) have noted that the members of the public have an urgent demand for more accurate, relevant, and reliable information online in the immediate post-disaster time, and the pervasiveness of ICT has made everyone capable of being an information seeker. After the explosions, the delayed news report from official media caused an information gap in the public. According to the interviews, after the evacuation at midnight, some victims urgently searched for information regarding the explosions through multiple channels including social media, television news, news portal websites, and baidu.com (the most popular search engine in China). The victim T.Z described the information gap she had been through:

*'I just kept an eye on the news (by using mobile phone) to see if they upgraded or not, trying to found out what exactly happened, because nobody told us what happened on earth. I looked through all the news websites including Tencent and NetEase to see if there was any report about that. We were all speculating in the group at that time, but no one was not sure what happened and there were several different versions about it.'*

As local residents posted and circulated more rich images during the process of engaging in the disaster, the first visual flow on social media was quickly replaced by the second one. The emergence and rise of the second flow proved that beyond being information seekers, people who have a psychological relationship with the disaster are prone to be information producers (Palen & Liu, 2007). Compared to the first and last ones, the second flow lasted longer, and local residents contributed more diverse visual content to fill the information gap in it. Almost all the interviewees engaged in this information flow, which was more about post-disaster response and recovery efforts. Some of interviewees even actively participated in the creation and circulation of news stories based on what they had experienced at the scene of the explosions. Some interviewees emphasized that an important reason to document and

share the first-hand images on WeChat is to refute rumours. This flow faded out a couple of weeks after the explosions.

Around the one-year anniversary of the 2015 Tianjin explosions, the third and last information flow emerged. Related coverage on mainstream media was rare because the topic was still highly politically sensitive in China. Therefore, the citizen-side news story sharing was more significant. By publishing the commemorative content from different perspectives on social media, this group of citizen journalists did not merely break the silence by the mainstream media and make an alternative voice but also created awareness of resistance among trusted friends.

In this case, the visual materials played an equally important role to that of the detailed captions. These first-hand pictures and short videos documented by posters effectively increased the credibility of the news stories. The samples above have proved that camera phone images are conducive to moulding the depiction of news stories and adding more affect to them. In addition to filling the information gap, it is fair to say that the local residents attempted to evoke and communicate social empathy and solidarity by creating and sharing the affective news stories. The various perspectives of news stories also demonstrate that non-professional forms of news creation can be ‘informative’, ‘newsworthy’, and ‘therapeutic’ in times of disaster (S. B. Liu et al., 2008).

### **3.5 Affective news storytelling: news values, forms, and the major role**

Through the eyes of citizen journalists, many audiences were able to see what happened at a closer distance with more details after the explosions. What stories were selected and published for attention on WeChat represents what news values were at the time of the 2015 Tianjin explosions. To get a better understanding of why local residents conducted citizen journalism practices, this section begins with an examination of what news values and forms were adopted by the local residents to capture the event of the 2015 Tianjin explosions. Moreover, based on the examination of the driving factors behind the news stories, this section takes a step forward to discuss the major roles of citizen journalists in times of disaster in China.

### 3.5.1 News values and forms of the affective news stories on WeChat

John Hartley (2002) has emphasized that news values are about news stories rather than the events themselves, and what elements make a story newsworthy are constantly evolving. As the worst man-induced disaster in China, there is no doubt that the 2015 Tianjin explosions have been prioritized for reporting. Through analysing the selected samples, it is evident that the local residents instantly turned the event into various news stories based on their first-hand reporting at the scene. This section adopts two categories of news values proposed by John Hartley to interpret what drove those citizen journalists to select the stories they did to explain the explosions afterwards (2002, p. 166):

- News values prioritize stories about events that are recent, sudden, unambiguous, predictable, relevant, and close to the relevant culture/class/location.
- News stories need to appeal to readers/viewers, so they must be commonsensical, entertaining and dramatic (like fiction), and visual.

According to Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012), news stories regarding large-scale incidents published on social media platforms such as Twitter combine traditional news values and the values that have particularly emerged on the social media platform. To illuminate the traditional new values indicated among the samples, this study borrows McQuail's conception of traditional news values, which includes the large scale of events, closeness to home, clarity of meaning, short time scale, relevance, consonance, personification, significance, negativity, and drama and action (2002). In this case, all the stories are about what the local residents experienced at the scene, so the news values of closeness to home and relevance can be found in all the news stories. To be more specific, closeness to home is mainly manifested by the words 'Tanggu', 'Tianjin', and 'people in Tianjin', and relevance is represented by the various story themes of the explosions. Besides, the story of firefighters reflects personification, drama and action are represented by the story of the certificate, and the clarity of meaning is evidently indicated in the commemorative story of the one-year anniversary.

Apart from traditional news values, the affective news stories in this case also reflect some prominent news values that have specifically emerged on social media. Based on Papacharissi's work on news values that have emerged on Twitter (2015), there are another three news values behind the samples: instantaneity, solidarity, and ambience. According to the interviews, most collected data including the samples were instantly published by interviewees at the scene. After the explosions, China's mainstream media were tightly controlled by the government; however, the affordances of mobile technologies and WeChat provided people with an opportunity to record and report the event instantly. The instantaneity of information updating by citizen journalists met the urgency of information-seeking among audiences. Meanwhile, as local residents in Tianjin, most of the interviewees are bound to local communities. Therefore, calling for or reinforcing solidarity through affective news storytelling is more likely to be accepted by their WeChat followers and cause wide resonance among them. In addition, the three visual information flows maintained ambience, which is 'an ambient information sharing environment' (p. 276) regarding the Tianjin explosions on WeChat. Although there was a large timespan between the second and third flows, the constantly and continuously updated news stories provided audiences with an always-on phenomenon.

The form of the affective news stories on WeChat is strongly visual in character. Based on Hartley's work on news process and values, Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012) have suggested that the importance of news values on social media is not merely in shaping how events turn into stories but also in shaping the forms of news stories told. In the case of the 2015 Tianjin explosions, news storytelling became a process of turning the event into 'atomized yet networked' (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 39) stories. Unlike Weibo, which limits users to 140 Chinese characters in each post, there is no restriction on the number of characters in WeChat friend circles. However, given the collected data, almost all the news stories in this case are short, simple, and affective. Compared to the traditional news report, emojis has been applied in the expression of news storytelling in order to add affective factors. Apart from photographs, the function of 10-second videos was commonly adopted to record an accurate and authentic version of the interviewees' reality. In the practice of citizen journalism, visual images are not merely a critical part of emulating the



professional forms of news reports but also supplement news content with visual narratives.

### 3.5.2 Citizen journalists as gate-watchers

With the prevalence of social media, the major role of citizen journalists has shifted from gate-keeper to gate-watcher (Bruns, 2005). The conception of gate-watching refers to ‘the continuous observation of material that passes through the output gates of news outlets and other sources, in order to identify relevant such material for publication and discussion in the gaterwatchers’ own site’ (Bruns, 2018, p. 27). In the process of news production, news stories can be selected completely depending on what citizen journalists are interested in and what they believe could make a meaningful contribution (Bruns, 2018). Therefore, Alex Bruns (2018) has noted that, in Western society, citizen journalists play an important role in analysing, interoperating, and commentating.

However, in the context of China, given the absence of professional journalists at some public events, it seems that Chinese citizen journalists are playing three basic traditional journalistic roles in times of disaster: disseminator, interpreter, and adversary (Weaver & Willnat, 2012). According to Reese and Dai (2009), the news reporting posted by Chinese journalists on social media has also been adopted to criticize, supplement, comment, check, and challenge the accountability of mainstream journalism. In this case, citizen journalists were the first to provide the eyewitness images of the explosions on the ground through social media. In the aftermath of the explosions, this group of citizen journalists maintained focus on monitoring the developments and updated the information instantly to meet the demands of the audiences they are familiar with. Finally and most importantly, in this case citizen journalists consciously or unconsciously played a prominent role in evoking empathy and solidarity among personal social networks.

## 3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I investigated how local residents in TBNA adopted the form of a non-professional journalistic practice via storytelling to produce and circulate their first-hand experiences of the 2015 Tianjin explosions on WeChat. I also examined

the role of affective news stories in articulating local residents' attitudes and appeals after a crisis. More than a reflection of reality, a news story is a creative product (Hartley, 2002). The local residents produced a large number of news stories as a personal memory to document and archive what was happened in the explosions. This sort of visual social media practices totally based on personal first-hand experiences, which are more likely to evoke other people's affect and emotions. Sadness and sympathy are the major emotions strongly presented in the non-professional journalistic practice of storytelling. These emotions directly link to local residents' horror, angry, grief, and even trauma.

What local residents creatively produced a combination of storytelling and images to supplement information that may not be reported in the mainstream media and articulate a citizen-side voice on a highly politically sensitive topic. Storytelling is an essential part of human experience that occurs at all levels of society (Anderson, 1991). In the case of the 2015 Tianjin explosions, the stories produced by the participants completely focus on 'us': people who suffered in the explosions and those who contributed to the relief work. The first-hand images play an important role in nurturing the textual content of affective news stories. As an integral part of the storytelling, visual images are not merely the evidence to strengthen the authenticity of the news stories but also the key element that is beneficial to mould, enrich, and expand citizen-side information in times of disaster.

As Zizi Papacharissi (2015) has pointed out, the affective news stories posted by citizen journalists on social media are always a mix of 'fact with opinions, and objectivity with subjectivity' (p. 267). Through analysing the examples, it is evident that the affect stories do not just reflect what the interviewees experienced at the scene but also their particular feelings and attitudes about the tragedy. In this case, sympathy and sadness are the two major emotions embedded in the news stories to solidify a sense of community and facilitate civic engagement at the neighbourhood level. Moreover, compared to Weibo, where ordinary people's voices are difficult to hear, circulating the combination of first-hand stories and images through WeChat is conducive to information circulation. For other WeChat users who are outsiders, citizen journalism as storytelling provides them with an opportunity to access unknown and unexpected information about the explosions.

# Chapter 4 Jamming the Smog: A Case Study of Air Pollution in Beijing

## 4.1 Introduction

In the last decade, most Chinese people have experienced an extraordinary amount of smog weather, which is caused by airborne particular matter 2.5 micrometres or less in diameter (PM 2.5) (G. Huang, 2015). Since PM 2.5 has significant negative health impacts, the issue of air pollution has become a leading social and political concern in Chinese society. On Chinese social media, the discussion of air pollution has evolved into a topic of national conversation. In particular, Chinese netizens circulate various forms of visual images as responses to the issue. For example, one of the most common practices is that people use their mobile phones to capture real-time air conditions and post them on social media.

In December 2015, the authorities issued their first ever 'red alert' for smog to warn and protect people from the poisonous air in Beijing. During conversations with local friends, I realized that checking the index of PM 2.5 via mobile phone apps has become the first thing many people do after waking up in the morning because they need the forecast of air quality to decide whether they can take their children to do outdoor activities or if they should wear a smog mask when going to work. When the red alert for air pollution was issued again in 2016, more than 20 other Chinese cities, including Beijing, were enveloped in heavy smog (T. Phillips, 2016). However, due to its unique political, economic, and cultural status in China, air quality in the capital city has come under particularly heavy scrutiny. Accordingly, air pollution in Beijing has received more attention from both domestic and international media. Given these facts, this thesis particularly focuses on the issue of air pollution in Beijing as a representative case to conduct a research investigation.

Drawing upon the collected data, it is interesting that compared to other environmental events that have occurred in China, culture jamming has never been so prominently employed as a response to environmental degradation as in this case. According to Mark Dery (2017), 'jamming' is the CB slang that originally described the illegal practice of disrupting ongoing radio broadcasts or conversations. From the

perspective of anti-consumerism, Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti (2005) has defined culture jamming as ‘chang[ing] the meaning of corporate advertising through artistic techniques that alter corporate logos visually and by giving marketing slogans new meaning’. From a social and political perspective, Christine Harold (2004, p. 192) has provided a commonly definition of culture jamming as ‘an interruption, a sabotage, hoax, prank, banditry, or blockage of what are seen as the monolithic power structures governing cultural life’.

This distinct phenomenon led me to consider that why and how do Chinese people use culture jamming to disseminate their critical messages about a long-term catastrophic environmental problem via digital networks? In what ways does culture jamming contribute to civic engagement in China? Is culture jamming prevalent on social media merely because it functions as a powerful tool to articulate people’s critical attitudes? To address these questions, this chapter begins by providing a detailed context regarding how the issue of air pollution in Beijing intertwines with social media in the context of China. Through analysing the major forms and content of visual materials provided by interviewees, this chapter attempts to illustrate a relatively complete scenario of how ordinary people use visual images to challenge the transparency of pollution data. Drawing upon the conception of culture jamming, the main body of the chapter explores how culture jamming has been employed on social media in response to an unprecedented air disaster, the impact of culture jamming on protesting a severe environmental issue, and why local residents chose the means of culture jamming to articulate their opinions on the air pollution.

This chapter is based on 10 in-depth interviews conducted by email and online voice calls. It must be pointed out that the visual examples presented in this chapter consist of two sources. One is the visual images obtained from the interviewees’ social media accounts (see Table 4.1) with their permission. This part of the visual data was either created and published or reposted from other people’s social media. The other is the visual images that impressed interviewees on social media during the period of smog; this part of the data was mined following the clues in the interviews and downloaded from online open resources.

**Table 4.1: List of interviewees**

<b>Interview number</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
1	Katherine Bi	34	Female	Corporate staff
2	Y. Li	27	Female	Corporate staff
3	Yi Zou	50	Male	Founder of an ENGO
4	Juqiang Song	32	Male	Freelance photographer
5	R. Song		Female	Corporate staff
6	L. H	35	Female	Corporate staff
7	Lancia Huang	33	Male	Internet technology company
8	JH Wang	33	Male	Internet technology company
9	Julia Zhu	34	Female	Consultant
10	YH Liu	29	Female	Performing instructor

## 4.2 Air pollution in Beijing and social media

The recent social media debate over PM 2.5 in China began in August 2008. When Beijing was scheduled to host the Summer Olympic Games, the U.S. embassy in Beijing installed a rooftop air pollution sensor and began to publish real-time data of PM 2.5 on their official Twitter account. This action provoked a nationwide online debate over air quality in China. At that time, the Chinese authorities did not widely collect and publicize air pollution data. For most Chinese people, the notion of PM 2.5 was new, and thus it quickly captured the public's attention. The perniciousness of the PM2.5 has been emphasized by both scientific evidence and public health concerns. Particle matter smaller than 2.5 micrometres is the major pollutant in Beijing's dark grey sky and can easily cause health damage by penetrating and

lodging deep in the lungs (G. Chen, 2009). According to a report released by the Asian Development Bank, even before PM 2.5 became the indicator of air quality in China, only a few of the largest cities in China met the air quality standards provided by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Q. Zhang & Crooks, 2012). There is no doubt that poor air quality has become a life threat for millions of Chinese citizens.

It has been proven that air pollution is difficult to eradicate. In order to present a positive image to the world, the Chinese government spent billions of U.S. dollars and made a series of stringent short-term administrative measures to reduce the air pollution during the Beijing Olympics. For instance, the government halted and relocated hundreds of industrial factories, power plants, and construction sites within a 150-kilometre radius of Beijing, strengthened emission control on motor vehicles, planted trees to prevent sandstorms, substantially developed the public transportation grid, and promised to reduce the pollution down to WHO standards (Mead & Brajer, 2008). However, the blue sky and other improvements were short-lived. In the wake of the Olympic Games, the air pollution in Beijing became worse than ever before. It has become a phenomenon that air quality improves dramatically when Beijing hosts large events. As a result, Chinese citizens have coined a series of phrases on social media such as ‘Olympic Blue in 2008, ‘APEC Blue’<sup>5</sup> in 2014, ‘Military Parade Blue’ in 2015, and ‘Two Conferences’<sup>6</sup> Blue’ in 2016 and 2017.

Following the rise of microblogging in China since 2009, the debate over PM 2.5 has continued to build momentum on Weibo. Opinion leaders and celebrities on Weibo have played an important role not only in evoking and influencing online debate but also in pressing the authorities to improve air pollution monitoring. For example, in 2011 when Weibo users found the disparity of published PM 2.5 data between the U.S. embassy twitter account and Environmental Protection Bureau (EPB) assessments, Pan Shiyi, one of the most well-known real estate developers in China, not only shared his self-tested results of air pollution with his millions of followers but also launched a vote through his Weibo account as a call for action for the government to promulgate stricter standards for air quality.

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<sup>5</sup> APEC stands for Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summits.

<sup>6</sup> The term ‘two conferences’ refers to the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference.

The numerous public complaints on social media finally spurred the government into action to mitigate the issue. In February 2012, the state council approved new nationwide standards of air quality in which PM 2.5 detection was included for the first time.<sup>7</sup> The new standards were reported as a bottom-up victory for Weibo users by the state-run media outlet Xinhua News Agency (Xinhua, 2012). In September 2013, the first version of the Air Pollution Action Plan was released to help the country rein in air pollution. It set PM 2.5 targets for key regions and required local governments to make significant reductions in five years (Hao, 2018). However, although the government and national leaders have made a series of positive responses, air pollution still remains a serious problem in Chinese society.

Although air pollution is no longer such a taboo topic in China because it is frequently discussed by the government and official media, there are still some limitations on social media. In February 2015, a self-financed documentary called *Under the Dome*, which is about the investigation of pollution and air quality in China, caused a national debate on social media again. The documentary was produced and narrated by Chai Jing, a former investigative journalist at China Central Television (CCTV), China's national television network. Aside from drawing more than 100 million reviews on video streaming websites within 24 hours of its release, it also resulted in 280 million posts on Weibo (Tram, 2015). The next day, the newly appointed minister of environmental protection Chen Jinming praised the documentary as the Chinese version of *Silent Spring*. Over two hours long, the video does not merely provide an insight into the cause and extent of air pollution in China but also deeply criticizes the government's lax environmental regulations and laws. Yuan Ren (2015) has praised the documentary for its profound impact in stirring up Chinese people's awareness about the dangers of smog and its call for solidarity in the face of this overwhelming air pollution crisis. Not long after, Chinese authorities took the documentary offline. Scholars (Johnson, Mol, Zhang, & Yang, 2017) have noted that the main reason for its ban was because the documentary evoked prevalent grievances that were likely to form a collective action against the government.

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<sup>7</sup> See [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2012-12/28/c\\_124164243.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2012-12/28/c_124164243.htm).

Apart from tightening their control on social media debates, the Chinese government also adopted multiple means to ease people's discontent concerning the issue of air pollution. They gave citizens the impression that air pollution is a scientific problem rather than a political one (Kay et al., 2015). This means that the problem only needs to be tackled by advanced technologies rather than a fundamental shift in the political and/or economic structures in China. Moreover, Hongtao Li and Svarverud (2017) have found that through making a historical comparison between air pollution in contemporary China and London's Great Smog Disaster in 1952, the Chinese state-run news media has attempted to shape the air pollution in China as 'an inevitable outcome of a particular phase of industrialization' rather than a serious problem unique to China (Hongtao Li & Svarverud, 2017). Li and Svarverud (2017) have also pointed out that following the example of London, the state-run media has tried to depict a bright future for Chinese people, saying that pollution will be solved one day, and 'London's today can be Beijing's tomorrow' (Tian, 2013). However, due to the lack of effective environmental improvements, Chinese people are frustrated and have expressed strong impatience and mistrust towards the government (Sha, Yan, & Cai, 2014).

Although the topic of air pollution has been under strict surveillance online, mobile technology and visual images provide ordinary Chinese people with a place to discuss the problem broadly. The combination of digital technologies and visual images does not merely provide ordinary people with a tool to challenge the transparency of pollution data but also plays an important role in disseminating people's critical attitudes. Based on the collected visual data that has been posted on both WeChat and Weibo, the visual images in this case can be generally classified into three categories. Apart from culture jamming, another two forms of visual images are visual comparison and individual near real-time recoding. In what follows, I focus on exploring how Beijing's residents have adopted these two forms to challenge the transparency of air pollution data.

## 4.3 Visual measures challenging the transparency and veracity of air pollution data

### 4.3.1 Real-time activism



With mobile technology having permeated everyday life, Chinese people have become used to live broadcasting ongoing events on social media platforms. M. Jiang (2016) has noted that these events are normally ‘provocative, scandalous, and intriguing’ (p.31). Simultaneously, an increasingly urgent demand to gain air pollution ‘facts’ has emerged, with the air pollution problem having become more serious in recent years. In this case, instantaneously recording and uploading images of the dark grey skies to social media is the most common visual social media practice. According to Min Jiang (2016), this form of social practice can be recognized as real-time activism, which is a new genre of media activism on China’s internet.

With the mainstream media absent from reporting information on air pollution, and the government’s iron grip on social media, large-scale social confusion ensued in China. In such circumstances, many local residents in Beijing began to take real-time pictures of smog weather and post them on social media to express their concerns and draw more public attention. For instance, the Beijing dweller Zou Yi began to post a visual diary on social media in 2013 and named it ‘Apparent at First Glance’. In the interview, he explained his starting point:

*‘I started to record the weather on 17<sup>th</sup> January 2013. I had just learnt how to use Weibo and WeChat at that time. After I took the pictures of smog, I uploaded them to my WeChat and Weibo accounts, to share with people, because at that time, people were panicked, confused, and worried about the smog. The information and guidance people could get from official channels was insufficient, so people feared the smog. Under such conditions, I started taking pictures to record the air quality in Beijing every day.’*

What Zou Yi photographed tapped into a deep-seated social problem in Chinese society. In the interview, Zou Yi admitted that the initial purpose of taking the pictures was to vent his complaint since the government had kept silent on the issue. When he realized the air pollution data published by the US embassy in Beijing and the EPB were different, he began to believe that his pictures were playing a role of telling the truth to the public. When the air quality continued to get worse, his visual diary of Beijing weather conditions went viral on Weibo and was widely reported by

both domestic and global media. These real-time pictures taken by local residents are a supplement to the information released by the authorities.

Photographing and posting near real-time images of air pollution widely and frequently emerged on Chinese social media during winter when air pollution became severe. On 7 December 2015, the readings of PM 2.5 exceeded 900 micrograms per cubic metre in some parts of Beijing, and the authorities declared the first ever red alert for smog (T. Phillips, 2015). Meanwhile, a series of preventative measures were implemented by Beijing authorities; for example, they temporarily shut down schools, suggested that residents stay indoors, and ordered thousands of vehicles off the roads. Red alert is the highest possible level of a four-tier warning system that was introduced as part of China's high-profile war on pollution (Griffin, 2015). In short, the air quality can be considered catastrophic when a red or yellow alert is issued. In 2016, air quality continued to decline, and the authorities declared a red alert again on 17 December 2016. At that time, there were about 22 Chinese cities enveloped in severe air pollution (T. Phillips, 2016).

For concerned citizens, recording and posting real-time images on social media has become the only way to demonstrate the harmful effects of air pollution in Beijing. Through displaying the catastrophic environment that they are living in, interviewees are not only expressing their concerns and dissatisfaction but also attempting to attract more public attention to the issue. Some interviewees expressed a similar intention, saying that the reason for posting images in near real-time is because they 'want more people to know what the circumstance in Beijing is'. As one of the interviewees, LH, explained, 'the environment we are living in is very important, I hope everyone can consistently keep their attention on the social topic; it affects every one of us'. Approximately one month before the first red alert was issued in Beijing in 2016, the whole city was already shrouded by heavy toxic air pollution. In such circumstances, another interviewee, YL, documented the view from the window of her office and instantaneously posted it in WeChat with an ironic caption that began with the colourful palette emoji and the text 'magic realism' (see Figure 4.1). During the interview, YL shared the story behind the post:

*'I remember that the air pollution index was over 500 when I posted that picture. The buildings and traffic bridge through the window were still visible on the photo, but in real life, I saw almost nothing. It would have been after 9 am when we began to work that I took the picture. Beijing had an alert on that day, and all primary schools and high schools were closed; the companies decided whether the staff would work from home or not. But we had to work eventually. I took the picture through the window when I was in the office. I was just like 'Oh, goodness me!' I felt helpless; it is a kind of choking feeling. Everything outside was covered by the grey air; I just felt it looked like some kind of magic realm ... What I want to say is, the government might cover the truth sometimes, or demand the media to ignore something, so I hope I could help people see the reality of air pollution on Beijing.*



**Figure 4.1. A screenshot of YL's post from 3 November 2016 posted in her WeChat friend circle.**

Meanwhile, I found that the interviewees always like to attach a screenshot of near real-time air quality data to their social media posts. During the interview, YL also provided me with a WeChat post with the caption 'basketball players, don't you guys

want to live?’ (see Figure 4.2). In the post, there are two pictures: one is of the residential area being enveloped by smog, and the other is a screenshot showing that the average real-time PM 2.5 data in Beijing at that time was 175. According to YL’s recall, the visibility was low due to the heavy smog that day, so she was very surprised that she found someone playing basketball in such conditions. Through instantaneously sharing the story she witnessed, YL did not merely want to show the reality but also to complain about the terrible surroundings that had not been substantially improved in Beijing. Under the post, one of her friends left a message saying, ‘175 definitely is a fake number.’

Mistrust towards the official air quality data has spread among Beijing residents. Scholars (Kay et al., 2015) have noted that people have realized the disparity of PM2.5 readings between the U.S. embassy and China’s official measurements. On Weibo, Pan Shiyi has also periodically posted both air quality readings to his 16.6 million followers. Interestingly, the U.S. embassy’s readings were always higher than the official Chinese measurements. It is evident that the disparity has increased people’s suspicion of official information.

Therefore, some interviewees have made an effort to challenge the transparency of air pollution data by circulating real-time images on social media. These near real-time images have been considered a crucial resource with which to help uncover the truth and put the pressure on the government. JH Wang, an IT employee, started his near real-time recording through Weibo and Blue Map in 2011. He frankly expressed that mistrust towards the official data is the driving force that makes him continuously pay attention to air pollution. He said,

*‘Because the government is absolutely shameless. On one hand, they fake the air quality data and on the other hand, they have done nothing effective to solve the problem ... According to the official data released by the government, there have been more and more days with blue skies. However, if you follow the U.S. reports of PM 2.5 readings, blue skies are not the same as a smog-free and zero-pollution situation. Despite the big drop in the official data, we feel that the air quality can be called “excellent” only three to five days a month, the rest are slightly or moderately polluted. And this is harmful to everyone, especially children.’*



**Figure 4.2. A screenshot of YL’s WeChat post updated on 14 October 2016. The caption is, ‘basketball players, don’t you guys want to live?’ (Provided by YL).**

### 4.3.2 Visual comparison: a memory practice

For this case study, visual comparison is mainly used to construct memory. For ordinary Chinese citizens, memories can be used as an effective tool of protection against the ideological hegemony shaped by the news media. Due to the top-down system present in China, the news media have been regarded as the foremost mouthpiece of the government. In Chinese society, citizens are overwhelmed by official information and interpretations of reality in every aspect of daily life (Kalathil, 2002). Therefore, ChingKwan Lee and Yang (2007) have pointed out that, in the context of China, social memory can be considered ‘social fact’ and is often used to make factual claims about past events.

In the digital era, visual social media have been shaped into a unique medium and form to archive, display, and circulate people’s personal and collective memories. There is no doubt that visual image plays an important role in recording and storing personal and group experiences, which can then be shared with others (Nancy Van House, Davis, Ames, Finn, & Viswanathan, 2005). Meanwhile, with the help of digital technology, ordinary people can express and present their first-hand

experiences in a variety of creative ways in everyday life. Through creating and archiving memories on social media, ordinary people are not merely able to subvert the official definition and interpretation of experiences in everyday life but also to enrich their collective memory (H. S. Li, 2015).

Visual comparison has been adopted to articulate what life as a local resident was like, and how those residents thought, felt, and interpreted the air pollution in Beijing. By constructing the memory, the interviewees attempt to give the public a strong sense of the toxic air pollution. For this case study, I selected two high-profile examples to illustrate how the local residents express discontent, opposition, and resistance to the environmental degradation by using visual comparison as a creative means of memory construction. The forms of visual comparison are different in these two examples.

Through embedding the desirable past in photographs, the first example does not merely give the public a sense of the change, which is from good to bad, but also fosters critiques and reflections of the present. In December 2015, photographer Song Juqiang posted a series of photographs comparing landmarks in Beijing on his Weibo account @飘在英伦 with the hashtag #lookatBeijinginadifferentperspective (see Figure 4.3). In this group of photographs, Song Juqiang is holding a mobile phone to show the pictures of good weather in front and behind is the severe air pollution of the day. The juxtaposition between clean, vibrant photographs of landmarks on the mobile phone and the bleak reality creates a contrast between the past and the current situation. As a result, the comparison effectively makes the current situation look worse and brings attention to the levels of pollution in Beijing. The iconic buildings in the photographs include the Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City, the Great Hall of the People, the CCTV headquarters building, and so on. Because of the symbolic importance of these landmarks in China, these photographs have an added layer of political meaning. Song Juqiang explained his understanding of what impact the photographs could have:

*'For ordinary audiences, it may deepen their understanding of smog. Because this group of photos has a quite strong visual impact with its direct comparisons. From the pictures, you realize that the sky could be such a clean blue in good air conditions. After seeing the photos, you may have a*

*deeper understanding of pollution, or you might like to publish a speech, which could make the authorities to pay attention to the issue ... For each of us, we might notice that our daily behaviours could have an impact on the environment. These are the positive impacts that these photos can have ... I think such heavy smog should be a big event in history, despite it not being a long-term phenomenon. Without doubt, smog is the product of the development of our time ... so I just want to record this temporal product of history through my lens.'*



**Figure 4.3. A screenshot of Song Juqiang’s Weibo post, which contains nine photographs of landmarks in Beijing. It was released on 1 December 2015.**

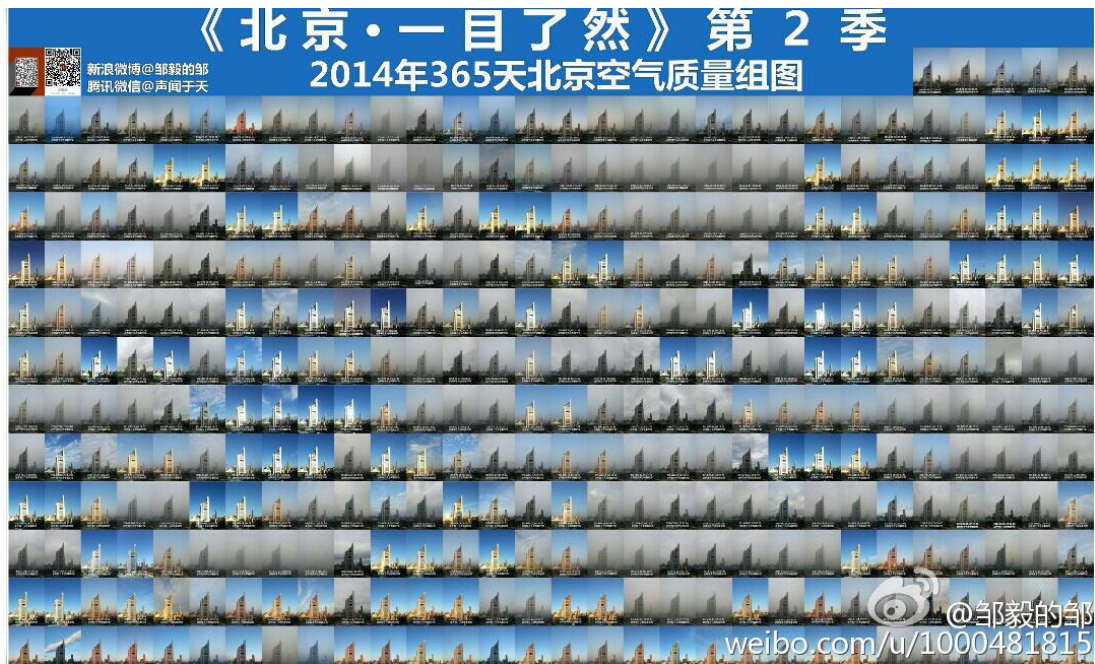
What makes the second example unique is that the interviewee Zou Yi has been taking photographs to document air quality in Beijing since 2013. No matter the weather, blue sky or smog, he steadfastly takes a picture of the same skyscraper from the same angle from his home every morning. Afterwards, he posts the photographs on his Weibo account @邹毅的邹 along with the air quality index. In the beginning,

he just made a composite of approximately 60 photographs of the city's air quality. However, the strong visual impact was beyond his expectation. Such an attempt inspired him to think about what the tens of millions of Beijing residents had been going through in the past two months. As a result, he decided to make a larger composite combining 365 photographs to show the air quality throughout the whole year (see Figure 4.4). Based on his first-hand experience, Zou Yi presents his personal memories of air pollution to the public by creating the visual composites over a certain timespan.

For this case study, the visual compositions have been used as a kind of subversive memory to remind people what happened. They preserve a complete memory that exhibits the reality of air quality in Beijing over the course of a year. Obviously, the visual compositions play an important role in reminding the public about the issue of air pollution in Beijing. Given that the topic of smog is still sensitive on China's internet, Zou Yi believes the visual memory he has archived can speak for him instead. In the interview, he said,

*'No need to say more or polish it [refers to smog]. You only need to take the picture. Everyone has their own feelings, so you don't need to put your subjective attitude or thoughts on it, just use the picture to express what you want. This is why a lot of people resonance with the composites. I think it means that the pictures I've taken represent a kind of just, objective and accurate attitude, well, maybe not just. These pictures are more popular in Beijing, because people believe these are what they have seen ... Sometimes, the government is not willing to say the air quality is not good in our country. Like now, we call the air pollution "heavy or slight fog" instead of smog. This is why I named my pictures as "clear at a glance". The starting point of naming the pictures is not to comment about it, or showing a personal perspective, but only to display an objective reality.... Do you know what China most lacked in the past five years? It is objectivity and truth.'*





**Figure 4.4. A composite of 365 images recording air quality in Beijing taken by Zou Yi from his home in 2014 (downloaded from Zou Yi's Weibo account @邹毅的邹).**

## 4.4 Jamming the smog

### 4.4.1 Culture jamming on China's social media

Unlike other environmental campaigns or protests that previously occurred in China, culture jamming has been prominently adopted by ordinary Chinese as a response during the period of smog in Beijing. Through hijacking the existing popular cultural and political materials, Chinese jammers are committed to challenging the 'highly centralized Chinese political context' (J. Ho, 2010) and developing counter-hegemonic discourses to fight for environmental justice on social media. In this sense, jamming air pollution can be seen as a way of Chinese people dealing with the miserable social reality of their everyday life. For this section, I selected a number of examples that were posted or personally archived by the interviewees to illustrate what cultural and political symbols have been reworked and disseminated and how they help to subvert the official discourses of air pollution.

Although it has a comparatively short history, culture jamming has been pervasively applied to a large number of social and political issues. Through various forms of semiotic de-familiarization, culture jamming is adopted to 'interrupt the flow of

mainstream, market-driven communications – scrambling the signal, injecting the unexpected, jarring audiences, provoking critical thinking, inviting play and public participation’ (DeLaure & Dery, 2017, p. 6). According to Bart Cammaerts (2007), culture jamming is always involved in disrupting mainstream political discourses and producing counter-hegemonic discourses. The primary goal of culture jammers is détournement, which is provoked by ‘re-routing spectacular images, environments, ambiences and events to reverse or sub-vert their meaning, thus reclaiming them’ (Lasn, 2000, p. 103). Sabotaging and appropriation are the two most prominent modes of intervention or resistance in culture jamming (Harold, 2004).

Although culture jamming is not a totally new technique, it has emerged as a new genre of political resistance on China’s digital networks. According to J. Xu (2016), culture jamming emerged as a key part of popular internet culture in 2016. Similar to in Western society, culture jamming in China is considered a counter-hegemonic discourse practice that, accompanied with the acerbic critique of contemporary politics in frisky artistic form (Ming, 2016), helps cope with the messiness of reality. Simultaneously, social media is the major territory where political resistance is being performed in China, although the censorship and surveillance is effectively implemented. In this regard, social media provides producers and protesters with a new channel to spread cultural jams across the borders in a short time with minimal costs (Cammaerts, 2007). However, culture jamming takes on some different features when it is situated in the peculiar political, cultural, and social conditions in China.

Culture jamming is often adopted as a playful civic engagement strategy on China’s social media. Yang and Jiang (2015) have noted that playfulness is one of the most prominent aspects of online politics and culture in China. When confronting serious environmental issues, posting and sharing images with playful characteristics has become an everyday political and social practice on China’s digital networks. Min Jiang (2016) has argued that this is because playfulness is conducive to circumventing the strict censorship and rapid dissemination of the alternative messages through social media. Moreover, playfulness plays a critical role in inviting citizens to participate in a social movement (Shepard, Bogad, & Duncombe, 2008). Within the form of culture jamming, DeLaure and Dery (2017) have suggested that the playful intervention can be linked to ‘laughtivism’, which refers to an activism

that undermines hegemonic power and ridicules dictators by adopting humoristic and symbolic actions as a political strategy (Novović, 2014).

In this case, Chinese jammers make every effort to conduct a series of symbolic actions in a more playful way. The various playful means include humour, irony, mocking, satire, pranks, parody, carnivalesque inversions, and so on (Cammaerts, 2007; DeLaure & Dery, 2017). Van Laer and Van Aelst (2010) have noted that these playful means are very important and powerful features of culture jamming tactics. Through adopting these playful means as a counter-technique, Chinese jammers disturb the influential cultural and political symbols in order to present a different reality and provoke critical enquiry on air pollution crisis. In terms of the roles of playful symbolic actions, scholars (Shepard et al., 2008) have claimed that they provide citizens with a non-violent way to engage with power, disarming and confusing opponents through unconventional logic and creating possibilities for new social relations between the powerful and the powerless and between and among the powerless.

All the images of culture jamming presented below are either provided by interviewees or downloaded from social media platforms. Because culture jamming is always anonymous, the authors of the examples here are unknown and difficult to trace. Graham St John (2008) has argued that the anonymity in culture jamming can be recognized as a kind of tactical disappearance, which effectively attracts public attention to the cause itself rather than the authors. More importantly, in the context of China, remaining unidentifiable to the authorities is conducive to avoiding causing any potential political risk, especially when the jammers attempt to parody the state leaders or the iconic figures.

#### **4.4.2 Jamming the smog: appropriation and sabotage**

Based on the collected data, two modes of resistance have been adopted in response to Beijing's air pollution: appropriation and sabotage. According to Christine Harold (2007, p. 74), pranksters and intellectual property pirates make appropriation work through 'playfully and provocatively folding existing cultural forms in on themselves'. Compared to sabotage, appropriation is less aggressive but 'still operates via an oppositional stance' (p. 160). Christine Harold (2007) has also noted

that sabotage has been recognized as a strategy of political resistance used to block and jam the working of consumer culture by way of parody and inversion. Instead of merely clogging existing energy or resources, sabotage provides jammers with a ‘launching tube’ (p. 78) to transmit newly created messages. In this case, through appropriating and sabotaging pre-existing commercial and political materials, jammers attempt to situate their critical discourses to articulate their dissent on smog. Although none of the interviewees are creators of the presented works of culture jamming, it is evident that posting or reposting the images through social media represents their attitudes towards the problem.

On 1 December 2015, Interviewee KB saw a ‘smog poster’ (see Figure 4.5) from other social media outlets. She then posted it in her WeChat friend circle in response to the heavy smog that had enveloped Beijing for quite a while. The content of the image derives from the well-known ‘keep calm and carry on’ poster produced by the British government in 1939 to motivate the British people to prepare for World War II. In contemporary society, the original slogan has been widely used as the theme for a wide range of products. If you walk down streets in London, you will find the slogan printed everywhere: mugs, T-shirts, fridge magnets, and so on. However, in this hijacked image, the crown was replaced with the Tian’anmen Gate. Since Chairman Mao proclaimed the founding of the People’s Republic of China there on 1 October 1949, Tian’anmen Gate has become a representative political symbol of the Communist Party of China. Additionally, the textual content had also been changed to ‘keep calm and breathe deeply then die’.

By using humour with a serious undertone, this appropriated message struck a chord with the well-educated urban middle-class. It not only reminded people about the detrimental effects of smog on health but also euphemistically criticized the government’s unfulfilled responsibility to environmental protection. In the interview, KB said she shared the image on social media because she thinks it illustrates her emotion and attitude:

*‘If I posted something about smog, it’s absolutely because there was smog that day. And then you post the update because, it’s some form of communication with other people. And you must feel a little self-mocking and a little helpless maybe; yes, feel helpless to the reality’.*



**Figure 4.5. Source (original source unknown) downloaded from the interviewee Katherine Bi's WeChat friend circle.**

During the period of air pollution, an image with the caption 'Feed Smog to the People' (喂人民服雾) (see Figure 4.6) was widely circulated on Chinese social media. In Mandarin, 'Feed smog to the people' is a homonym of 'Serve the People' (为人民服务), which is one of the most well-known political slogans in China. It was originally derived from a speech Mao Zedong made in 1948 and has been widely used for the Chinese Communist Party's propaganda. At present, this slogan still decorates Xinhua Gate, where is the entrance to the residence of the top leaders in China. The pre-existing image from this example is a popular political comic (see Figure 4.7) produced by the Communist Party during the Cultural Revolution. In the comic, a group of people are holding each other's arms, and the one standing in the forefront is holding Mao's little red book. These figures represent all the ordinary people from different social and ethnic groups; it also shows the solidarity of Chinese people under the leadership of the Communist Party. By using Photoshop, Chinese jammers have disrupted the original political slogan by imitating Mao's calligraphy in an effort to mock and condemn the government for not fulfilling their responsibility regarding the air pollution crisis. The new catchy slogan went viral as soon as it emerged on social media and has been widely reported by domestic commercial media.

<sup>8</sup> The English translation of the talk is available at [http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3\\_19.htm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_19.htm).



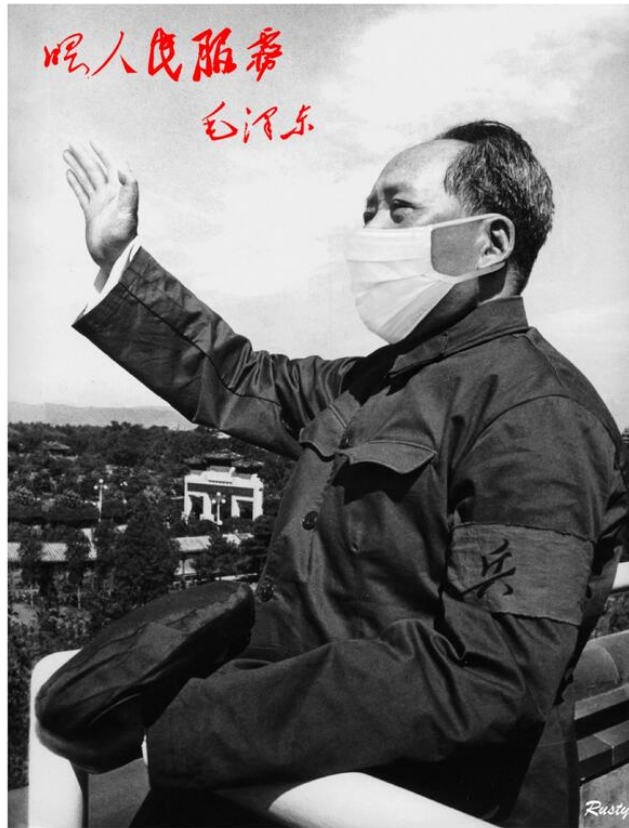
**Figure 4.6 (left).** Source (original source unknown) downloaded from my WeChat friend circle in 2016.

**Figure 4.7 (right).** The state’s propaganda comic ‘Serve the People’. Source: <http://www.photophoto.cn/pic/19498452.html>.

Chinese jammers have also targeted the political figures: in this case, Chairman Mao.<sup>9</sup> The hijacked image was originally taken by Mao’s appointed photographer Lv Xiangyou and called ‘Chairman Mao Meeting with the Red Guards’ (毛主席接见红卫兵). On 18 August, 1966, Mao went up to the Tian’anmen Gate and celebrated the inauguration of the Culture Revolution with millions of Red Guards<sup>10</sup> (红卫兵). In the photograph, Mao is wearing an armband with the words ‘Red Guard’ on his left arm and waving his right hand to the people who have fallen into a crazed frenzy at Tian’anmen Square. This photograph not only became a symbol of the beginning of the Cultural Revolution but it is also the most popular, influential, and widespread image from the entire event. In the hijacked image (see Figure 4.8), Chinese jammers put a white mask on Mao’s face, and in the upper-left corner, the caption ‘Feed smog to the People by Mao Zedong’ imitating Mao’s calligraphy is added and highlighted in red. Since the Communist Party in China portrayed him as a great leader, Chairman Mao has become a symbol of the state and power for Chinese people. Chinese jammers have sabotaged Mao’s image in an effort to utilize the symbolic power of Mao not only to increase the image’s incongruity but also to mock the dominant power.

<sup>9</sup> Mao Zedong, also known as Chairman Mao, who was the founding father of People’s Republic of China. He ruled as the Chairman of the Communist Party of China since it established in 1949 until his death in 1976.

<sup>10</sup> The Red Guards were groups of militant university and high school students mobilized by Mao Zedong as a paramilitary force during the Cultural Revolution. These young people wore green jackets with red armbands as uniforms.



**Figure 4.8. The hijacked image of Chair Mao meeting with the Red Guards (image downloaded from open online resource).**

In addition, culture jamming has been used to expose the environmental injustices people suffer in everyday life. By using photograph manipulation, Chinese jammers reconfigure fake, hilarious images with duanzi (段子, jokes), such as the image of a person's nose with two cigarette filters (see Figure 4.9). In this fake image, a person is blocking his/her nose with two cigarette filters, and the caption says, 'get two cigarettes first, nip the filters, peel the wrap off, and then put the filters in your nostrils. This kind of filter is able to effectively block particulates bigger than 1.6 micrometres. You will not feel that your nose is blocked, and this method is better than wearing a mask. I am a living Lei Feng<sup>11</sup>, and this is what I can do for you (three smile emojis)'. Obviously, cigarette filters are unable to block the toxic particles in the air, and no one would actually take this seriously or try this method in reality. However, the absurdity and sarcasm derived from the combination of

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<sup>11</sup> Lei Feng is a well-known political and cultural figure in China. He was a soldier in the People's Liberation Army. After his death, he was portrayed as a selfless and modest person who devoted his life to serving people and the Communist Party.

hilarious image and ironic caption reflects people's helpless moods, especially when they have been living within a severely polluted environment for such a long time.



**Figure 4.9. Image of how to prevent breathing in toxic air. Source (original source unknown) downloaded from LH's WeChat friend circle.**

Given the examples analysed above, in the context of China, cultural jamming has until now focused more on attracting public attention and mocking the dominant power than on challenging the capitalist corporate brand culture. Through creating and disseminating culture jamming, ordinary Chinese make an effort to develop an alternative place to convey messages of public interest and push the government to be more accountable in solving the issue of air pollution. Jammers not only appropriate and sabotage the prevalent cultural and political materials both domestically and globally, but they also creatively Photoshop a combination of fake images and absurd jokes. In this case, texts play a critical role in interpreting people's voices and increasing the playful effects of culture jamming. Since these examples of culture jamming are evidently characterized by humoristic irony, in what follows I analyse culture jamming from the perspective of ironic criticism to illustrate what local residents have attempted to articulate concerning the air pollution crisis.

#### 4.4.3 Culture jamming as ironic criticism



According to the collected data, culture jamming regarding air pollution in Beijing is often accompanied by ironic tonality. As a figurative device, irony is notoriously difficult to define (Reyes, Rosso, & Buscaldi, 2012). Jorgensen, Miller, and Sperber (1984) have provided a traditional interpretation of irony and defined it as a communicative behaviour where a speaker ‘uses a figurative meaning opposite to the literal meaning of the utterance’ (p. 112). In this case, it is evident that some of the interviewees intentionally chose to express their negative attitudes by mockingly saying something positive about the issue of air pollution in Beijing. According to Dews, Kaplan, and Winner (2007), this form of ironic remark is the one most commonly used in everyday practice and can be perceived as an ironic criticism. Colston (1997) has also noted that when an event has turned out to be the opposite of what is expected or desired, people often choose to use verbal irony to criticize a person or a situation. Compared to literal criticism, ironic criticism is less offensive but can express more condemnation (Colston, 1997). This perhaps partly explains why people are inclined to adopt this form to respond to the air pollution issue on social media in China, where blatant criticism or mocking the government is most likely to be censored. As Dews et al. (2007) have confirmed by conducting experiments, when speakers remark on an unpleasant situation that is out of their control, addressees consider ironic remarks no less critical but also humorous.

Among the ironic remarks presented in this chapter humour is found to be an integrant part of ironic criticism, and it plays a prominent role in fuelling and enhancing the effects of criticism and spreading the jams rapidly. From the perspective of release theories, Phillips and Milner (2017) have noted that ‘humour provides an emotional outlet allowing participants to express socially taboo thoughts and feelings’ (p. 96). The payoffs of humorous posts on social media can be attributed to their proliferation and magnetism. Aside from the indirectness, absurdity, and incongruity of humour in ironic criticism, it is also conducive to the circulation of critical remarks on social media (W. a. Phillips, 2017). Digital media scholar Tim Highfield (2015) has noted that social media users are more likely to circulate funny posts. In the research field of social movements, Sorensen (2008) has argued that as a form of nonviolence resistance, humour has powerful potential in facilitating outreach and attracting public attention.

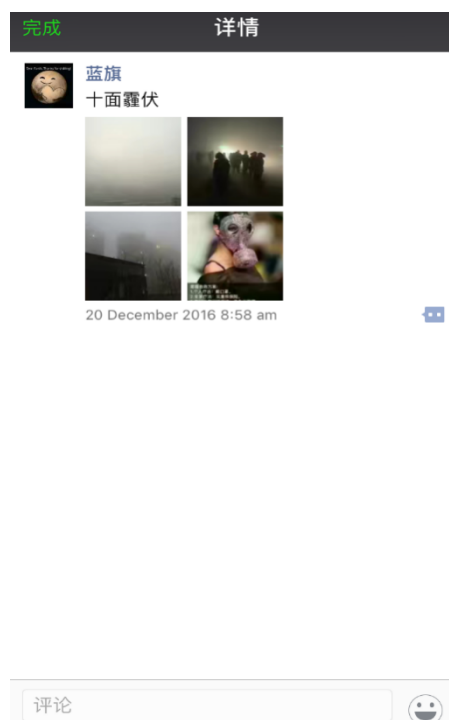
In my interview with LH, he mentioned that his intention of posting these jams and hilarious images in WeChat friend circle is to ‘make more people know about the severity of air pollution in Beijing’. Additionally, he explained the roles of culture jamming in circulating information:

*‘We have already obtained enough information on air pollution from the news media. These hilarious images are more like a kind of artistic creation, and provide people a cunning obscuring way to reach a deep point, which is not usually touched by the mainstream media ... Apart from containing more information, these kind of images are easy to understand and convenient to circulate.’*

In this case, humorous ironic criticism is mainly expressed as a combination of duanzi (段子, jokes) and exaggerated images. Duanzi plays a critical role in providing readers with a context to interpret the speakers’ complex intentions. On China’s internet, creating and sharing duanzi on social media has become one of the most popular everyday practices. However, blatantly political jokes about the country or the state leaders are not allowed and are more likely to be censored in China. During the period of air pollution in Beijing, especially when the data of PM 2.5 went off the chart, a variety of visual images intertwined with duanzi were manipulated by Photoshop and immediately posted on social media platforms. Without the text transposed on them, these two examples of exaggerated images can mean anything or nothing. According to G. Yang and Jiang (2015), duanzi can be labelled with several colours to distinguish the contents. The two examples of culture jamming combined with duanzi in this section fall into the category of ‘Gray’, which is defined as ‘jokes that convey critical views about politics and society’ (G. Yang & Jiang, 2015).

In order to illustrate the contents of this form of ironic criticism that emerged during the period of air pollution in Beijing, another representative example of culture jamming is presented and analysed in this section. This example was reposted from other social media sources in the interviewee LH’s WeChat friend circle in December 2015 and December 2016. The caption in this example (see Figure 4.10) provides several solutions for self-rescue in the smog weather for the government and people of different social statuses. It reads, ‘How to survive from smog: 1.for

ordinary individuals: wearing masks; 2. for whole families: purchasing health insurance; 3. for rich and idle people: traveling out of Beijing; 4. for millionaires: emigrating overseas; 5. for the government: wait for wind'. The background image is a female model wearing a luxury gas mask embedded with thousands of pink and silver crystals. The exaggerated crystal mask in the image not only mocks the smog's absurdity but also ridicules the government's unfulfilled responsibilities regarding the issue.



**Figure 4.10 (left). The visual image regarding how to survive in smoggy weather. Figure 4.11 (right). A screenshot of LH's WeChat post published on 20 December 2016.**

Unlike the example of how to prevent breathing in toxic air with its more serious tone in expressing people's emotions, this example reflects a series of new social phenomena that have come into being in Chinese society in recent years. For example, 'smog migration' was once the hot topic on China's social media, because many middle-class residents planned to escape the hazardous air pollution in Beijing and moving to other unpolluted Chinese cities, or even overseas. This smog avoidance tourism is called 'lung cleaning' trips. In recent years, it has become a trend for many people to spend their holidays outside of Beijing to enjoy fresh air. According to the SouthChinaMorningPost (2017), keyword searches for 'smog

escape', 'lung cleansing', and 'forests' have tripled on the website of one of the largest Chinese travel services, Ctrip.com, during the period of air pollution in China.

Ironic criticism like making up solutions for air pollution enhances rather than diminishes the impact of the condemnations. Colston (1997) has argued that people express more condemnation by way of ironic criticism. Given the above examples, the absurdity and incongruity caused by sarcastic humour can be seen as adding emphasis to the local residents' intensely negative feelings towards air pollution. In the interview, LH explained that by reposting and sharing posts on social media, he believes the hilarious and ironic images will not only make more people notice the air pollution happening in Beijing but will also make them realize how terrible the issue is. Obviously, people believe that increasing condemnation is more likely to attract public attention on social media, pushing the government into making effective efforts to improve the issue.

In addition, by integrating duanzi into images, culture jamming is cleverly designed to confuse official viewers. Having analysed the case of the Dark Glass Portrait campaign, Min Jiang (2016) has argued that culture jamming has been designed by Chinese political dissidents to bypass censorship. In this case, humour and irony within culture jamming also plays an important role in maintaining the visibility of people's critiques of social media. Despite the multiple meanings in the ironic utterances that may invite the possibility of misunderstanding, these two examples are based on a similar idea: to articulate people's strong dissatisfaction with the status quo of the environment they are living in. As a result, everybody can easily understand the meaning and intention behind the humorous ironic criticism by the jammers.

It is clear the culture jamming adopted by interviewees in this case is more related to politics instead of consumer culture. By creating and circulating the jams on social media, people are able to directly express feelings of intolerance and public hatred towards a common enemy: smog. Simultaneously, Chinese citizens and activists use culture jamming techniques to denounce the government's unfulfilled responsibility regarding environmental issues. However, although culture jamming provides people with a creative and inventive way to fight for environmental justice, it should not be optimistically considered as a panacea for Chinese society.

Scholars have questioned the political efficiency of culture jamming. It is true that culture jamming helps Chinese citizens articulate their critiques, but it cannot create any structural social or political change (Cammaerts, 2007). Heath and Potter (2005) have argued that culture jamming serves more as a distraction or a ‘steam-valve’. In the context of China, the role of a ‘steam-valve’ can be interpreted to mean that culture jamming helps ordinary Chinese vent their complaints towards problems that may threaten social stability while simultaneously attracting the government’s attention, causing them to either improve or repress the problem (G. Yang, Goldstein, & deLisle, 2016). As an act of guerrilla activism, the dissenting messages expressed by culture jamming in this case are fragmented rather than sustained. As a strongly individualized form of political resistance, culture jamming is less likely to form any collective actions or mass demonstrations (Wettergren, 2003). Moreover, what deserves our attention is that Cammaerts (2007) has expressed concerns that political actors are actually using culture jamming as a ‘hip’ communication strategy. In such circumstances and based on the interviews, the following section suggests shifting the focus of analysis of culture jamming from political to social functions.

#### 4.4.4 Culture jamming as a lubricant for sociality

According to the interviews, culture jamming has not been used merely for political resistance but also serves as a lubricant to smooth personal relationships on social media. Scholars (McAdams, McCarthy, & Zald, 1988) have suggested that it is better to understand culture jamming as an expressive outlet that has affinities with political resistance in contemporary environmental movements. Yang and Jiang (2015) have noted that as a staple practice of online political satire, culture jamming is first and foremost a networked social practice that was adopted by ordinary Chinese to communicate social and political problems in a playful way. Therefore, I attempt to shed light on how culture jamming has served to activate or maintain social networks in an individual environmental protest on social media in two ways.

First, sharing and circulating examples of culture jamming often involves solidification of group identity. In the interviews, interviewees mostly mentioned ‘sharing them with friends’ when we discussed the intentions of posting the hilarious and ironic images on social media. Wettergren (2009, p. 10) has asserted that the playfulness embedded in culture jamming can be seen as an emotional energy that

‘create[s] and reproduce[s] group solidarity, the (sacred) symbols of social relationship, and the shared norms and values’. Based on the interviews, culture jamming has been adopted as a kind of social capital to show the netizens’ everyday taste and aesthetics. In other words, some interviewees attempt to label themselves as insiders of a certain group. In the follow-up interview, KB explained her intention in sharing and circulating the image with the caption ‘keep calm and breathe deeply then die’ on WeChat, saying,

*‘Firstly, it is holding onto a hot topic, creating something to talk about that everyone can relate to. Secondly, I think this self-deprecation is also a way to show that I am an interesting person. It is really not that complicated.’*

Second, circulation of culture jamming on social media is conducive to causing more interactions among friends and acquaintances. In the interview, LH expressed that he prefers to share jams and other hilarious images because it could help him attract more attention from his social networks. Culture jamming is not necessarily always political or critical, but is obviously full of creativity. The creativity of culture jamming provides people with an opportunity to share communal laughter or encourages people to create a personal meaning for laughter. For example, LH attached the short textual interpretation ‘十面霾伏’ to the jam of a female model wearing a luxury gas mask (see Figure 4.11). The phrase translated in English means ‘everywhere is shrouded by smog’. In Mandarin, this is homophone of ‘十面埋伏’, the name of a popular Chinese film directed by one of the country’s most famous directors, Zhang Yimou.

## 4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored how the local residents in Beijing have adopted several forms of visual social media practices as a response to the issue of air pollution. I have found that culture jamming has never been prominently adopted to articulate people’s everyday opinions on an environmental issue. Through appropriating and sabotaging the existing well-known visual materials, particularly the political materials, Chinese netizens have creatively criticized the government’s unfilled responsibility regarding air pollution. In this case, none of the participants engaged in producing the culture jamming, and the original sources are difficult to trace.

However, like other Chinese netizens, the participants expressed their everyday opinions by reposting and re-interpreting the culture jamming through social media. In the context of China's internet, the anonymity of culture jamming means more freedom and safety for the original creators, especially when they have appropriated and sabotaged iconic political materials like propaganda posters, the Communist Party's slogan, and images of Chairman Mao.

The humour and irony embedded in culture jamming provides an important opportunity to provoke and connect people's online action. Although the circulation of culture jamming is individualized and fragmented, it still can be recognized as playful resistance. Laughter driven by the humour and irony enables a large number of far-flung people to laugh together and thus forms a sense of belonging (Meyer, 2000; Speier, 1998). In this manner, drawing upon Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) theory, creating and circulating culture jamming as a response to a public event can be recognized as an online carnival in which Chinese netizens can circumvent internet censorship, enjoy temporary freedom, and build up an alternative world to articulate their opinions, dissent, and critiques in a playful way. Meanwhile, it is important to realize that the political efficiency of culture jamming is limited, and interviewees also adopt culture jamming to maintain and smooth personal social networks. However, even though the trajectory and effectiveness of culture jamming on social media is short lived, I argue that laughter helps ordinary people's voices to be widespread, and the cumulative effect could bring the possibility of problem solving.

# Chapter 5 Environmental Advocacy

## Campaign and Image Events on Social Media: A Case Study of River Watchers

*'We have no better choices, no more suitable platform, so the We media is the only way for us to disseminate information'. (Hong Wu, a River Watcher)*

*'Social media is the only weapon we have. We don't have any compulsory means to solve the problems as we are not working in the government, so voicing to the public is the only thing we can do. If without social media, we volunteers almost lost the meaning of existence, I think'. (Yuan Genliang, a River Watcher)*

### 5.1 Introduction

According to the investigation results released by the central environmental protection inspection team,<sup>12</sup> water pollution has become the most concerning environmental issue in Hunan province, and many chemical plants discharging raw sewage into rivers is one of the main causes of this issue. In order to reduce and prevent water pollution in Hunan Province, a locally based grassroots ENGO called Green Hunan initiated an image-oriented environmental advocacy campaign on China's most popular microblogging service Weibo in April 2011. During the campaign, Green Hunan called on concerned local residents to join the campaign as volunteers and encouraged them to regularly monitor and test the water conditions in local rivers, especially where chemical plants are located. By using mobile phones, the volunteers record test results and water conditions in these areas and then post the images on Weibo via their personal accounts. These environmental volunteers are called River Watchers.

With the help of mobile phones and social media, Green Hunan and its volunteers have shifted the local water pollution issue to a more favourable arena. By exposing the images and drawing public attention on social media, the River Watchers have

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<sup>12</sup> 中央环保督察 | 湖南：水污染最受关注，长沙信访问题最多  
[https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_1680634](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1680634).



obtained leverage to question and dialogue with the local government through formal and informal channels. Aside from providing test toolkits to the volunteers, Green Hunan also set a series of action guidelines in terms of how to record the pollution by taking images and what key elements should be included in a Weibo post. No matter what the test results are, most volunteers regularly upload and share the images through their personal Weibo accounts to enhance the campaign's influence. However, as a grassroots group, the voice of River Watchers is difficult to hear. Despite having some success in the beginning, the campaign has been trapped in the dilemma that repeatedly recording similar images of the water pollution is less likely to maintain audiences' attention. To overcome this hurdle, River Watchers have attempted to explore the possibilities of enhancing the campaign's visibility in the public space. To date, they have created a couple of successful image events on social media. Beyond attracting more public attention, visual social media has helped ordinary people create a social controversy around a local environmental issue in China.

This chapter is mainly intended to determine how ordinary people use images to enhance the visibility of local environmental issues in the public space by engaging in a social media-facilitated advocacy campaign. To address this question, the chapter begins with analysis of what tactics the ENGO recommends to maintain the performance of the advocacy campaign on social media. It then focuses on how the volunteers implement the tactics in everyday practice and utilize the images to solve the issues by dealing with the local authorities. Based on the interviews and the collected visual data, I found that River Watchers do not stratify with following the instructions designed the ENGO on how to take photographs of water pollution. During the process of the campaign, they attempt to frame the reality of water pollution and increase visual values by incorporating affect in their images to cause social resonance. Focusing on the approach of visual rhetoric, this chapter explores what messages are embedded in the images in the Chinese context, how and why River Watchers create affective reality in an environmental campaign, and what kind of roles these images can play in accelerating civic engagement on environmental issues. As a result, this chapter argues that beyond documentation and exposure, the environmental volunteers actually frame the reality of environmental injustice in their everyday visual practice. Through framing the reality, ordinary people are able

to construct a social controversy and effectively engage in environmental issues within a limited political space in the context of China.

This case study relies on the data collected from fieldwork conducted in multiple cities of Hunan Province in December 2018. To recruit potential interviewees, the former campaign organizer Liu Ke helped me form a WeChat group and invited several River Watchers to join. In the group, I explained the research purpose to the group members. Additionally, a semi-structured interview guide was designed to investigate how the volunteers produce environmental visual information using their mobile phones, how they disseminate the information on social media, and how they perceive the role of visual social media in the environmental campaign. During the fieldwork, 10 in-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face in Mandarin Chinese, and each one typically lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. To understand how the River Watchers obtained first-hand information about water pollution, I went to a monitoring spot with the interviewee Zhang Zhibiao and observed how River Watchers routinely check and test the river water quality. Since a critical clue was found in the process of transcribing, I conducted another two interviews via online phone calls. The follow-up questions and parts of the visual data were exchanged with interviewees via WeChat instant messages. After data collection, all the transcripts were translated into English. The demographic information of the interviewees is listed in Table 5.1 below.

**Table 5.1 List of interviewees**

<b>Interview Number</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
1	Yu Lixiang	64	Male	Retired, a full-time volunteer
2	Zhou Yun	33	Female	Self-employed
3	Qin Qiwei	30	Male	Manager of a kayaking club
4	Yuan Genliang	35	Male	Worker
5	Li Long	38	Male	Electrician
6	Wang Huipeng	28	Male	Self-employed
7	Zhang Zhibiao	55	Male	Retired, a full-time volunteer
8	Zhang	32	Male	Employee of a kayaking club

	Hongmou			
9	Lei Qiqi	39	Male	Full-time environmental volunteer
10	Li Bing	20	Male	University student
11	Hong Wu	47	Male	Full-time environmental volunteer
12	Song Wei	34	Male	Self-employed

## 5.2 Environmental advocacy campaigns in China: opportunities and constraints

Advocacy is a powerful tool for civic organizations to achieve a wide range of goals. According to Prakash and Gugerty (2010), the term ‘advocacy’ refers to a systematic effort conducted by actors who aim to develop or achieve specific policy goals, and environmental protection is one of the most prominent domains where it has often been applied. On this basis, Robert Cox (2015) has conceptualized the understanding of ‘advocacy’ in the realm of environmental communication as an act conducted by a variety of social forces, including environmental groups, to persuade or argue in support of ‘a specific cause, policy, idea, or set of values’ (p. 179). Therefore, an environmental advocacy campaign has been generally defined as ‘a strategic course of action, involving communication, which is undertaken for a specific purpose or objective’ (Cox, 2015, p. 181).

The campaign of River Watchers is a bottom-up environmental advocacy campaign that aims to advocate people’s rights-to-know about the local water pollutions and awake people’s awareness of environmental protection.<sup>13</sup> In the past decade, frequently occurring environmental woes have caused great demand for effective environmental protection in Chinese society. Scholars (S.-Y. Tang & X. Zhan, 2008) have attributed one of the reasons for the failure of environmental protection to the ‘lack of adequate agency transparency and public participation in environmental policy making and implementation’ (p. 430). As a locally based grassroots ENGO, a significant characteristic of Green Hunan is its strong volunteer and participant spirit. In the campaign, Green Hunan relies on local residents as a critical force to disclose

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<sup>13</sup> 《绿色潇湘十周年》, Ten-year anniversary of Green Hunan, 2017.

the images of water pollution on social media in order to halt the local water pollution and hold the local government accountable in environmental governance.

To address how the grassroots ENGO developed a localized advocacy campaign to raise public awareness, it is necessary to understand the political and social opportunities and constraints that ENGOS are facing in China. Unlike their counterparts in Western society, Chinese ENGOS and environmentalists have different conditions under which to mobilize support for their programs. Although the space for people to engage in public issues is limited in China, Chinese ENGOS and their volunteers are still able to develop campaigns to defend rights if they take full advantage of opportunities.

According to scholars' (Sima, 2011; Zhan & Tang, 2013) observations, Chinese grassroots ENGO developed in the 1990s and have become more capable of mobilizing grassroots support and engaging in policy-making since the Sichuan earthquake in 2008. In recent years, the central government has realized that the state apparatus has limited administrative resources for environmental protection and local governments implement environmental laws and regulations inadequately (Xie & Van Der Heijden, 2010). As a result, the Chinese central government has begun to allow ENGOS and citizens to get involved in environmental governance as a third sector to monitor local government and business companies in order to maintain social stability (Zhan & TANG, 2013).

On one hand, the central government has built up a multilayered environmental protection apparatus based on a top-down network of EPBs (G. Chen, 2009). For instance, in February 2016, in order to govern the issues of urban river pollution, the Ministry of Environmental Protection launched a WeChat reporting platform and encouraged citizens to disclose the issues through the platform. In this study, most interviewees had used the platform to report the issues and affirmed its positive impact on environmental problem-solving, though they questioned its real effectiveness.

On the other hand, the central government has also developed a decentralized system of environmental governance to produce better environmental performance. China's

Environmental Law clearly indicates that ‘it is the local government’s responsibility to improve the environmental quality in their jurisdiction.’ More importantly, Chinese central government has adopted the environmental indexes to assess local officials’ performances and determine their future promotions (G. Chen, 2009). As a consequence, although the local government and officials actually have limited authority and resources, they are assumed to have the highest responsibility for environmental policy implementation (Ran, 2017).

The political opportunities always combine with technological opportunities. With the advent of Web 2.0, more established civic organizations have quickly embraced social media to facilitate civic engagement and collective actions (Obar, Zube, & Lampe, 2012). Affordable and wearable mobile devices and social media platforms have provided ENGOs and activists with a low threshold of technology and expense to amplify and sustain their voices in public. With the help of social media, ENGOs and activists are able to reach their target audiences directly rather than relying on traditional communication channels as before (Svensson, 2016).

However, due to the limitations of institutional systems, the nature of Chinese civic ENGOs is ‘depoliticised’ (G. Yang & Calhoun, 2007). As Peter Ho (2001, 2007) has pointed out, unlike their counterparts in Western society, Chinese civic ENGOs adopt non-confrontational stances towards environmental issues rather than seeking structural political and social change. In its report, the All-China Environmental Federation describes the general principles that Chinese ENGOs have been following: ‘to assist not to complicate, to participate not to intervene, to supervise not to replace, and to offer solutions not to break the law’ (ACEF, 2006). In this case, Green Hunan is not an exception. Like most ENGOs in China, Green Hunan and its volunteers maintain a cooperative rather than confrontational relationship with the local government. In this case, the activities Green Hunan requires the volunteers to engage in are non-radical and non-confrontational.

In addition, since the Chinese government has been constantly strengthening its control over the society and the internet, the ways in which ordinary people use social media to engage in the environmental issues have been transformed. At early stage of environmental movements in China, for example, among a series of anti-PX

project protests that erupted in multiple Chinese cities from 2007 to 2012, mobile phones and social media played an important role in shaping a collective action repertoire to assist the mobilization and organization of an offline protest (S. Grano, 2015). In today's Chinese society, although it has been less common to mobilize and organize large-scale offline social movements to defend individuals' rights, ENGOs and individuals have created new modes of online environmental activism with the evolution of digital technologies. The following section analyses how the grassroots ENGO Green Hunan has formed a localized environmental advocacy campaign via visual images and social media.

### 5.3 A visually oriented online advocacy campaign

Based upon the theoretical framework of the environmental advocacy campaign informed by Robert Cox (2015), this section focuses on analysing how a locally based ENGO has facilitated visually oriented civic engagement on social media by mobilizing local residents from three perspectives: what the campaign objective is, who the key decision makers are, and what strategies have been adopted. In addition, this section unfolds the intricate interactions among the local government, local residents, and ENGO during the advocacy campaign.

First, an effective advocacy campaign needs a concrete campaign objective to help participants understand 'what exactly does the campaign want to accomplish?' (Cox, 2015, p.183). Following Cox's definition, a campaign objective could be 'a specific action, event, or decision that moves a campaign closer to its broader goal' (p. 184). In this case, the campaign objective is to protect local water resources. As Green Hunan claims in its official handbook, through mobilizing and organizing the campaign to reduce and prevent local water pollution, it is ultimately aimed at advocating the rights to know about environmental issues among local residents.

Second, in order to carry out an effective advocacy campaign, it is necessary to identify the key audiences (Maibach, 1993). The key audiences are equivalent to what Robert Cox (2015) calls 'decision makers', which refers to people who are capable of responding to the issues. Who should be considered the key audiences is

directly related to the development and implementation of campaign strategy. In this case, the key audiences can be divided into primary and secondary levels.

The primary audience is ‘the decision maker who has authority to act or implement the objectives of a campaign’ (Cox, 2015, p. 185). In the context of China, governmental involvement is the crucial factor for solving environmental issues. Therefore, persuading the local government to seriously implement the relevant laws and regulations to hold local enterprises accountable is the best way to prevent the problems of local water pollution. According to the interviews, instead of exposing the issues on social media, reporting the issues to the local government officials with an informal communication channel has become the preferred choice in River Watchers’ everyday practices. It is fair to say that the achievement of campaign objective depends on the local government’s favourable response.

In this campaign, supporters, the general public, opinion leaders, and news media constitute the secondary audiences. In the context of China, public attention is recognized as the pivotal bargaining counter to push the government to respond to controversial public issues. Green Hunan relies on its secondary audiences to expand advocacy influence and gain public attention on social media. Therefore, secondary audiences are always the vital force necessary to hold the government accountable on environmental governance.

Moreover, the extent to which the general public will mobilize in support of a cause is based upon their different understandings of issues, personal or social constraints, and degree of involvement (Grunig, 1989). In this case, the ENGO has designed a concise, compelling, and memorable message to express the campaign’s value, which is ‘engagement brings change’. This message is employed to awake local residents’ awareness of public participation in environmental issues and argue that individuals’ efforts could improve their living situations. It not only emphasizes the importance of local residents’ engagement in solving environmental issues, but also motivates citizens’ social responsibilities in public affairs. Additionally, the word ‘change’ implies the possibility of a successful action, which forms a perception that ordinary people have ‘self-efficacy’ (Bandura, 1994) to not only accomplish the campaign tasks but also help and benefit the whole society.

Third, to persuade the local government to act on the campaign's objective, Green Hunan has developed a strategy that aims to generate public attention by posting and circulating visual images of local water pollution issues on Weibo. In the context of China, when citizens collectively advocate for attention to be given to an issue on social media, public opinion could bring networked power and group pressure to force the government to address their concerns and influence the policy decision process (Luo, 2014). The forms of public attention on social media are various; even 'clicktivism' or 'slacktivism' is conducive to garnering public attention. On China's social media, this popular form can also be called 'surrounding gaze'. Despite the fact that these low political risk activities merely serve as 'feel-good' activism (Morozov, 2009) and are unable to achieve any effective political and social change on social media (Putnam, 2000), they are conducive to increasing the visibility of social controversies and the concentration of public opinions on the issues (J. Xu, 2016).

## 5.4 The campaign's communication tactics

Robert Cox's theory provides us with a basic framework for understanding the construction and operation of an environmental advocacy campaign, but given the data and information collected from the fieldwork, Green Hunan has actually developed more communication tactics to sustain and reinforce the campaign. It seems that these communication tactics are not only conducive to helping the volunteers avoid provoking the government while exposing the information about local water pollution, but also to reinforcing the solidarity of the campaign. In essence, however, the ENGO is attempting to act as a co-worker rather than an adversary of the local government.

### 5.4.1 River Watchers: a collective identity

In the campaign, Green Hunan initially formulated a collective identity of River Watchers to maintain long-term performance and strengthen the solidarity of the campaign. A large number of scholars have proven the importance of collective identity in social movement. In the research field of social movement, sociologists (Polletta & Jasper, 2001) have defined collective identity as 'an individual's



cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and it is distinct from personal identities, although it may form part of a personal identity'. Polletta and Jasper (2001) have also argued that successfully framing a collective identity can be conducive to a social group recruiting members and supporters, gaining public hearings, making alliances with other groups, defusing opposition, and so on. With the development of ICT, the study of online activism has also demonstrated that the participants in an online community have an integrated sense of belonging because they share 'common concerns, a common enemy, and, typically, a common space' (McCaughey & Ayers, 2013, p. 8).

In order to recruit volunteers and cultivate their sense of the identity, Green Hunan has highlighted the importance of local residents' engagement. Green Hunan has claims that '*the local residents know the local history, environment, current situations and benefit entanglements, and they have not only the power but also the motivation to act*'. This mobilized claim accurately interprets the pre-existing social, cultural, and affective bonds among local residents on the concrete issue of the water pollution, which is not isolated. As Fireman and Gamson (1979) have argued, the previously shared bonds among individuals can be significant stake in a collective action. In addition, emphasizing the character of localization in the campaign not only reflects who River Watchers are but also connects local residents from diverse groups to address a shared environmental concern. Based on the investigation of air quality test activities in China, J. H. Xu (2014) has noted that a collective identity enables ENGOs to solidify horizontal connections among participants and mobilize social forces, which are diffuse and fragmented, to challenge the current issues with a bottom-up approach.

Among a variety of cultural materials employed in this campaign, the hashtag #RiverWatchers is prominently employed as a common mark to emphasize the group's identity on social media. Attaching the hashtag to each Weibo post is clearly required as an indispensable part of the regular format of posting. Aside from exchanging resources, the hashtag often serves to increase the exposure of a conversation within the platform and help advocates to quickly circulate their

messages (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). More than providing a quick retrieval system for people who are searching for updated information, the hashtag is particularly conducive to continuing the conversation beyond the originating dialogue by creating an identifier or tag for fellow activists (Stache, 2015). In this case, the hashtag #RiverWatchers has been used as an online campaign symbol to build solidarity, and it characterizes the collective identity by their shared practical experiences. This tag offers the volunteers a sense of belonging to highlight who they are and what their purpose is.

In effect, the volunteers continue to develop multiple meanings of their group identity. In the beginning, Green Hunan recognized its volunteers as environmental information monitors. Monitoring a local river and presenting the monitoring information to the public via social media is what River Watchers are required to do in this campaign. As Postmes and Brunsting (2002) have suggested, a collective identity can be developed when the community members interact with each other online. Due to different self-efficacy, some River Watchers strive to maintain their performance on social media as educators or advocates to deliver information about environmental education and raise awareness. For example, interviews with River Watchers demonstrated that some of them have tried to clarify the meaning of test results, explain the seriousness of water pollution, and persuade the public to change their behaviours.

#### 5.4.2 A fixed Weibo posting format

In term of how to document and post information on Weibo, Green Hunan provides its volunteers with a specific format. According to the River Watchers' toolkit handbook (see Figure 5.1), a standard Weibo post should attach the hashtag #RiverWatchers, use global positioning system (GPS) to show the geographic information of the monitoring location, indicate the observation time, and record the amount, colour, smell, and pH value of the water and whether there are bubbles or floating objects in the river. At the end of the post, the volunteers should use the @ symbol to link to the official River Watchers Weibo account and other related accounts. Regarding the visual information, the uploaded images are required to reveal two kinds of content: water quality and the surroundings of the river.

  
**记录+信息发布**

  
工作笔记本


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**观测信息记录**  
将现场观测信息，通过纸笔（笔记本）或电子产品（手机）记录下来

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**观测信息记录**  
将观测信息通过网络平台—微博发布也可以上传至蔚蓝地图

## 方式一：微博发布形式



\*微博发布形式

- 1 务必写上主题标签#河流守护者#
- 2 打开手机定位，记录观测点定位
- 3 注明观测时间
- 4 观测信息：水量大小
- 5 观测信息：水的颜色
- 6 监测信息：泡沫或漂浮物
- 7 监测信息：水的气味
- 8 监测信息：PH值（酸碱度）
- 9 微博@河流守护者和  
其他相关伙伴
- 10 现场观察照片上传（照片为两张，一张为水质照片，一张为  
周围环境照片）


  
河流守护者微博  
扫一扫关注我们

Figure 5.1: Weibo posting format provided by Green Hunan.

Screenshot from the River Watchers' toolkit handbook (page 5).

It is evident that Green Hunan requires its volunteers to maintain a neutral and objective stance when exposing the water pollution information on social media. On one hand, avoiding rational or sentimental expression is conducive to helping the Weibo posts bypass the online filter system and maintain the performance of the campaign on social media for longer. On the other hand, although this news reporting style ensures the objectivity and accuracy of information, it is difficult to maintain long-term public concern about the issues by repeating the simple and fragmented messages.

The interviews also indicate that River Watchers consciously avoid presenting any personal judgements to illustrate the images in the short-term videos. Due to the visual affordances of Weibo and the technical capacity of mobile phones, some volunteers have embraced the short-term video to document the environmental issues.

In the process, the volunteers are cautious in recording their voiceovers on the footage. Interviewee Li Long explained the reason for this:

*'I don't add any subjective judgement. I don't think the audience need my judgement, and my judgement might bring harm to this video. I only say what I see... The only thing I need to do in the video is to present the truth. My purpose of recording videos is mainly to present the truth rather than criticize any government department'.*

Meanwhile, most of the volunteers also distribute completely different content on same issue of the water pollution in WeChat friend circle. This can be considered as an online communication strategy by the River Watchers. According to the investigation from the field trip, the WeChat posts usually attached some pictures which were not posted on Weibo with more personal and emotional comments, which aim to tap into the River Watchers' personal social ties. Unlike using Weibo to attract public attention and pressure the local officials, the River Watchers attempt to use WeChat to introduce their efforts and cause more attention from local people through their personal social networks.

### 5.4.3 Exploiting personal social networks

As a grassroots group, River Watchers rely on their personal social networks to implement and develop communication tactics during the process of the campaign. On one hand, since some active volunteers have obtained enough leverage on social media, they have gradually built up an informal communication channel with the local government officials to solve the issues. According to the interviews, instead of using social media, reporting the issues directly to the related officials via the informal channel has become the primary choice of these active volunteers. It seems that the local government officials are also willing to deal with the issues in this way because extensive online exposure of the environmental issues could negatively impact their promotion. Zhang Zhibiao, a well-known local environmental activist and a senior River Watcher, has commented that the informal communication channel *'is a faster way to solve the issue'*. One of the Interviewees Hong Wu shared his experience about how his informal communication with the local officials:

*'We might send the photos to the head of local environmental department or the leaders of local government directly when we found the pollution issues. They usually went to solve the issues immediately, so it is unnecessary to disseminate the information online. It could bring them in trouble if my post ranked in the system of public opinion monitoring. These things can make them very stressful. They always say that I can send any issues to them directly, and it won't be late to post the issues online if they couldn't figure the issues out or give me feedback in 24 hours'.*

In Chinese society, there is a special cultural phenomenon that informal rules function more significantly than laws and regulations on public events (Xie & Van Der Heijden, 2010). This personal connection in the Chinese context is often referred to as the practice of *guanxi*, which has been recognized as a crucial element that helps individuals successfully interact with the political system and bureaucracy (Xie & Mol, 2006). Because the formal organizational networks of ENGOs are still weak in China, volunteers' personal networks have become an alternative way to expand campaign influence.

On the other hand, personal social networks also contribute by proliferating the campaign's messages and recruiting volunteers. Most of the interviewees noted that they have often sent the pollution information to people in their personal network via social media, especially WeChat groups. For example, Zhou Yun mentioned that she always calls for help from her friends to circulate the information she posts, and she believes that this is conducive to solve the problems quickly. As Jun J. Liu (2015) found in his study, Chinese environmental activists perceive their personal social networks as social capital to make the campaign information reach as many people as possible in a short period of time.

#### **5.4.4 Citizen camera-witnessing**

The process of recording and posting images of local water pollution by mobile phone in this campaign can be recognized as 'citizen camera-witnessing' (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014). The term was originally defined as political activists and

dissidents taking life risks to produce incontrovertible visual evidence to mobilize global public support around unjust and disastrous public events. Even though the water protection campaign is completely non-confrontational, it encourages participants to play the role of witness and take advantage of visual images to call for public attention to the environmental issue. By producing visual evidence and bearing witness in public, River Watchers thus obtain the legitimacy to be an integral part of the public event. During the interviews, ‘evidence’ was frequently mentioned to describe the role the images play in this campaign. The interviewee Li Long made the following statement:

*Yes, they [referring to visual materials he recorded] are evidence. I mean that I provide evidence of pollution through photos and videos. Water quality could vary over time. For example, the outfall might be discharging when I went to check it in the morning, but it stopped in the afternoon. This is also why I emphasized the time of recording. I think it can record the state of the moment.*

Moreover, the organization also adopts a kind of crowdsourcing and participatory mechanism to aggregate pollution data on social media. In contemporary society, it has become a pervasive phenomenon that the environmental justice movement has begun to engage in big data tactics to gather, visualize, and expose pollution evidence (Mah, 2017). In this case, with the low technical barrier, Green Hunan uses volunteers as data nodes to collect and upload water pollution data. According to the interviews, all the data produced by the volunteers is real-time or close-to-real-time data, which ensures the speed of information circulation online. To aggregate the data, Green Hunan requires the volunteers to include three key elements in each post: use the hashtag #River Watchers, call attention to River Watcher’s official Weibo account, and attach geographic information. Although this crowdsourcing and participatory mechanism is facing the dilemma that similar data has been repeated multiple times, it is an integral part of the environmental justice struggle.

Generally speaking, these communication tactics effectively help the organization promote the campaign and maintain its performance on social media. However, these tactics also limit the expansion of the campaign’s influence. As the campaign

continues, it faces a significant hurdle in that the general public's attention to the campaign is gradually waning while the local water pollution problem has not yet been completely solved. In this circumstance, River Watchers have begun to explore the possibilities of increasing the campaign's influence through exploiting the affective power of images in their everyday practice.

## 5.5 Practices of documenting reality

In this case, conveying reality to the audiences is considered the core value of the images. Interviewees emphasized the importance of the objectivity and authenticity of information in gaining public support and trust. However, as Martin Hand (2012, p. 76) has pointed out, 'photographs are necessarily partial documents of the real, through which elements are selected or excluded, made visible or invisible, and are often subject to staging of one kind or another'. In other words, the reality performed in the images is what River Watchers want the audiences to see. Based on the collected data, River Watchers have developed a couple of principles regarding how to document reality via images. This section explores what reality regarding local water pollution the volunteers are attempting to convey and how they cope with the subtle boundaries between the malleability and authenticity of digital images in everyday practice.

### 5.5.1 No manipulation

The most important principle to maintain the authenticity of images is 'no manipulation' by the interviewees. In the era of digital photography, manipulating the digital images has become a pervasive cultural phenomenon. The prominent feature of malleability in digital images has subverted our conventional perception that the photographic images can authentically record the reality; in contrast, manipulation has enlarged the distance between reality and digital images (Mitchell, 1992). As the technical capacity has been pervasively embedded in smart phones, even amateur photographers are able to easily alter their visual productions in everyday practice. Despite this wide range of digital manipulation approaches, the practice of manipulation in this case specifically refers to using coloured filters to exaggerate the extent of water pollution.

Using a range of filters to modify image colours has been widely accepted in contemporary culture (Van Dijck, 2004), but it is recognized as a kind of deceit rather than enhancement of reality in the context of environmental issues. As the interviewee Lei Qiqi has noted, *'Environmental issues are not like other stuff, you cannot edit'*; modifying the water colour is considered an unacceptable way to exaggerate the seriousness of the water pollution. It could lose the audiences' trust and negatively impact the campaign's reputation. As a result, the interviewees believe that *'what is posted should be authentic, there is no rumour or drama in it'*, and sharing the images without using any filters is intended to *'show the original colours of the water'* and *'objectively reveal the issues by the photos'*.

### 5.5.2 Amplifying part of the reality

In order to pursue visual impact, River Watchers sometimes deliberately amplify a certain part of reality while capturing images at pollution locations. Sturken and Cartwright (2001) have noted that *'the creation of an image through a camera lens always involves some degree of subjective choice through selection, framing and personalization'* (p. 16). According to the interviews, there are two methods River Watchers often adopt to highlight key points in the images: one is choosing a special aspect to frame the image, while the other is adjusting the composition by cutting and cropping. As a senior River Watcher, Yu Lixiang expressed that *'in my photos, I mainly rely on the selected aspect and composition to illustrate the issues'*. During my fieldwork, the River Watcher Qin Qiwei provided a photograph of a dead fish (see Figure 5.2) and shared his experience to illustrate how he deliberately emphasized a part of reality to make his image look *'better'*. The meaning of *'better'*, he explained, is having more visual impact.

Once, Qin Qiwei tried to use his mobile phone to record a heavily polluted river near his home; however, due to the technical limitation of the camera lens, the pictures he captured could not reflect the water colour as dark as it actually looked. Then, he found that there was a dead fish floating on the river, and he decided to capture the dead fish from a foreground view to create visual impact. With a low angle and a close-up to see the environmental issue, Qin Qiwei emphasized the factor of the dead fish in the image. Through the image, he attempted to connect the fish's death to the



water pollution in order to warn of the damage to local people's health caused by the water pollution. Apparently, compared with a not very dark water colour, the dead fish is more likely to elicit people's anxiety concerning the local drinking water resources. During the interview, he explained his purpose in amplifying the death of a fish in the image:

*'In some circumstances, photos are used to magnify the event, just like the photo of a little dead fish I mentioned. From my perspective, the pollution was not such terrible as I saw on the spot, but people probably think the pollution is severe when they look at this photo. This is because photography is about which aspect or point you take'.*



**Figure 5.2: Photograph of a dead fish (photo credit to Qin Qiwei).**

Adjusting the photograph composition by cropping to amplify a certain part of the reality is another approach that is pervasively adopted by River Watchers. According to the interviews, the purpose of cutting or cropping photographs is to *'delete some unwanted content, which has nothing to do with the critical elements in the image'* rather than to mislead public opinions on the problem. In the digital age, cutting and cropping is one common and unavoidable manipulation approach and has been

recognized as a kind of ‘authentic manipulation’ (Hand, 2012) that has no relation to deceit or fabrication but refers to ‘a pragmatic way of producing an authentic account of what people wish to convey’ (p. 81).

In everyday visual practice, River Watchers are not satisfied with simply documenting the environmental issues; in contrast, they have been trying to create images with a highly selective view that emphasizes some parts of reality and excludes others. Apart from the technical capacity mentioned above, the volunteers have actually adopted various approaches to shape the communicative possibilities of the images. As Hansen and Machin (2013) have argued, the ways of seeing images provided by producers are significantly connected to constructing viewers’ engagement, and what is deliberately constructed in images is intended to evoke a desired ideological alignment and response from the target audiences. Based on the collected data, the next section explores how River Watchers create a particular reality in their images on social media.

## 5.6 Image events and visual rhetoric on social media

### 5.6.1 Environmental image events on social media

According to Deluca and Demo (2000), the term ‘image events’ refers to ‘staged acts of protest designed for media dissemination’, and it is one of the more central rhetorical activities that have been used to change the way people think about and act towards environmental issues. In Western society, civic ENGOs began to deploy image events and mass media in support of a wide range of environmental issues in the 1970s. For example, in 1975, Greenpeace activists steered little rubber speedboats to prevent a Soviet whaling ship from hunting whales off the coast of California. During the process of the action, Greenpeace documented how the whalers fired over the heads of the activists without warning. Although the action failed to save the whales at that moment, Greenpeace launched a very successful image event afterwards and provoked attention to saving whales around the world. Due to the stunning success of this operation, tactical image events have been

pervasively employed by Western radical ENGOs to promote public communication, create social problems, and form public opinion.

In Chinese society, image events take on different characteristics but play a prominent role in providing ordinary people and marginalized groups with a new possibility for civic engagement. The examples of Chinese ENGOs employing image events on social media are countless. Since 2011, several small ENGOs have established a do-it-yourself air quality testing campaign across multiple cities in China. The campaign encourages citizens to test the air quality and post the results on social media in order to challenge the government's lack of information transparency and promote citizens' right to know about air pollution (J. H. Xu, 2014). As a local grassroots ENGO, Green Hunan employs image events on social media with a similar mechanism.

However, in the case of Green Hunan, individuals actually play a more prominent role than organizations in producing the environmental image events. Unlike the producing process in Western society, which can often be radical, River Watchers create socially controversial topics and expands the possibilities of debate by staging the image events in a non-confrontational way. Based on the data collected from fieldwork, this section focuses on analysing the image events from a rhetorical perspective to explore how ordinary people adopt a non-confrontational way to articulate their dissent and resistance of local environmental injustice by provoking social controversy in the images.

### 5.6.2 Visual rhetoric as an analytical tool

Rhetoric can be visual even though it is still conceived as verbal discourse. A large body of scholars have contributed to enriching and extending the visual dimension of rhetoric (Kevin Michael DeLuca, 2012; Handa, 2004; Olson, Finnegan, & Hope, 2008; Rice, 2004). According to Olson et al. (2008), visual rhetoric refers to the 'symbolic actions enacted primarily through visual means, made meaningful through culturally derived ways of looking and seeing and endeavouring to influence diverse publics'. In this sense, visual images work in rhetorical ways that primarily function to persuade the target audiences. Following this definition, Robert Cox (2015) has furthered the function of visual rhetoric in the research field of environmental

communication, which is ‘both pragmatically – to persuade – and constitutively, to construct or challenge a particular “seeing” of nature or what constitutes an environmental problem’ (p. 74).

Beyond the process of seeing, visual rhetoric provides us with a central approach to focus on the process of meaning making of symbolic actions (Rice, 2004). Analysing the rhetoric in visual images helps us understand how image makers influence and construct reality for their audiences by conducting symbolic actions (Olson et al., 2008). Based on a case study of radical environmental groups, J. Delicath and K. DeLuca (2003) have found that image events have been adopted as a kind of rhetoric activity to deliver argumentative fragments in the public sphere. Therefore, this section focuses on analysing the rhetoric of image events created by River Watchers in the campaign in order to explore how ordinary people present their claims and provoke public debate on a local environmental issue within a limited political space in China. According to the data collected from fieldwork, in what follows I examine the image events created by River Watchers from four perspectives: juxtaposition of oppositional symbols, visual comparison, creation of condensation symbols, and supplementation of visual pleasure.

### 5.6.3 Wedding photographs: juxtaposition of oppositional symbols

The set of wedding photographs next to the polluted river is the most successful image event in this campaign so far (see Figure 5.3). In September 2013, to help his friend have more stylish wedding photographs, Hong Wu suggested that the young couple take their wedding photographs next to a polluted river that they had monitored regularly since joining the campaign. The bridegroom Song Wei is also a River Watcher, and he agreed with the idea without hesitation. In the interview, Song Wei said that this idea has brought one of the most significant moments in his life. That night, when Hong Wu checked the photographs on his computer at home, he was completely impressed and uploaded the photographs to his Weibo account immediately. Beyond anyone’s expectations, the wedding photographs next to the polluted river went viral on Chinese social media in a very short time. On Weibo, not only ordinary netizens but also some Big Vs like Deng Fei (邓飞) reposted the

wedding photographs. Soon, the wedding photographs also hit many domestic mainstream media headlines, including the largest state-run media CCTV and People's Daily. This set of photographs has successfully attracted public attention and evoked national debate by converting personal experience into a public event.



**Figure 5.3: One of the wedding photographs next to the polluted river (photo credit to Hong Wu).**

China's internet is crowded by a cacophony of voices (Yang, 2009), so the volunteers have had to find an effective way to enhance the visibility of their appeals. With limited social capital, these grassroots activists' voices are difficult to hear in the public space, especially facing the sheer number of text, data, images, and other information circulated on social media. According to the interview with Hong Wu, based on his previous work experience in the media industry, he has realized that *'it would be hard to work out environmental issues without using some new means to draw public attention'*. In this circumstance, some active River Watchers began to exploit opportunities to garner support and draw public attention by delivering affective messages in their images. The set of wedding photographs is one of the most prominent examples that effectively addressed the problem of distracted and disinterested spectators. On Hong Wu's WeChat account Environmental Observation (环境观察), he expressed that the purpose of these wedding photographs is to *'awake more people's awareness to care about the pollution issues in our surroundings'*.

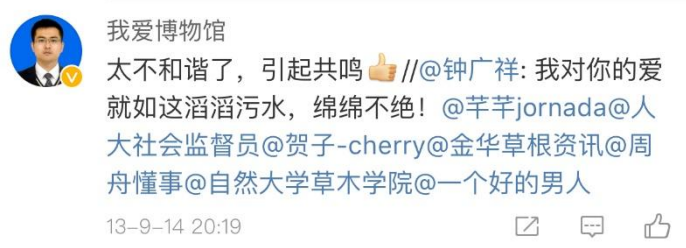
What the bridegroom Song Wei texted with the post of wedding photographs is low-key and non-confrontational, just like any other regular monitoring post in this campaign. According to the report from the state-run medium *Economic Information* (2013),<sup>14</sup> the textual content that Song Wei recorded was ‘No.14 observation point, the outfall at west of Tianxingdi River, Zhubu Port, Xiangtan City, the amount of water is large, many bubbles, stinky. pH test result is 7, water is colourful. Simultaneously, the expectation index for clean river is 10, happiness index is 10!’<sup>15</sup> Soon after the Weibo post was released, the audience seemed to realize the injustice and absurdity of local water pollution quickly from reading the wedding photographs post.

A River Watcher whose Weibo user name is Xiangtan Maoge (湘潭矛戈) also witnessed the whole shooting process of the wedding photographs. After taking the photographs, he also uploaded and shared several wedding photographs through his Weibo account. Unlike Hong Wu and Song Wei, his post still exists on Weibo. Under the post, people’s responses to the wedding photographs demonstrate how some ordinary people have interpreted and made sense of the wedding photographs:

*This looks so unpleasant [in a wedding photo]. It strikes a chord in me (followed by a thumb up emoji). (See Figure 5.4)*

*This is much more than just a wedding photo. It shows deep feelings about life! (See Figure 5.5)*

*Wedding is such a beautiful thing. How could it be relatable to water pollution? I feel uncomfortable looking at it. (See Figure 5.6)*

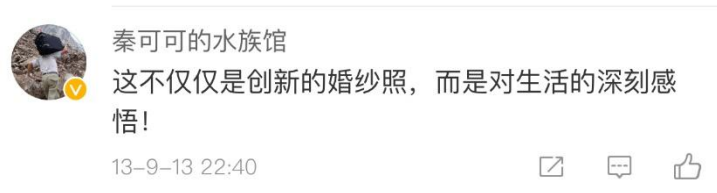


**Figure 5.4: Comment by Weibo user I Love Museum**

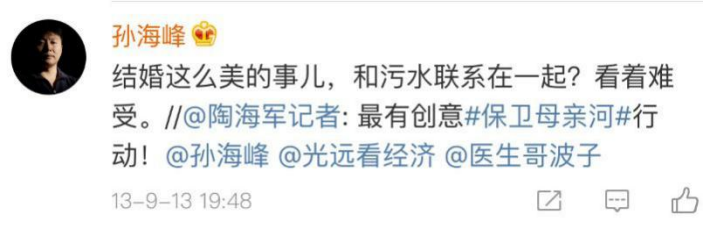
**(Note: Figures 5.4, 5.5, and 5.6 are screenshots from Xiangtan Maoge’s Weibo post).**

<sup>14</sup> [http://dz.jjckb.cn/www/pages/webpage2009/html/2013-12/16/content\\_83965.htm?div=-1](http://dz.jjckb.cn/www/pages/webpage2009/html/2013-12/16/content_83965.htm?div=-1)

<sup>15</sup> Since the initial Weibo post of the wedding photographs has disappeared, all the relevant information and data are collected from interviews, mainstream media reports, and other related River Watchers’ Weibo posts.



**Figure 5.5: Comment by Weibo user Qin Keke's aquarium.**



**Figure 5.6: Comment by Weibo user Sun Haifeng.**

According to these reactions, two oppositional elements – a wedding ritual and polluted river water – ironically constructing a spectacular image is the main reason why this set of wedding photographs has had widespread public resonance. In the wedding photographs, we can see a happy young couple, particularly the bride wearing a beautiful white wedding dress and holding her husband's hand while standing next to a polluted river. The photographer positioned the young couple (the most important part of the wedding ritual) in the foreground in the image. Simultaneously, in the background, there is an outfall discharging sewage into the river, where numerous white bubbles are floating. These spectacular images have been employed as the only way to break through the indifference of the intended audience (Szasz, 1994). As Nancy Fraser (1992, p. 123) has argued, spectacular images are the rhetoric of subaltern counterpublics who have been excluded from the forums of the public sphere, rather than the displays of rulers. The affective power of the wedding photographs is derived from the juxtaposition of two oppositional symbols. According to Rice (2004), oppositional elements consist of conflicting styles, generic violations, juxtaposition, paradox, irony, contrasting ornamentation, and other oppositional ideas. The set of wedding photographs successfully constructs a contrast by juxtaposing the sacred and the profane. In our common understanding, a white wedding dress has a sacred meaning, and the polluted river water obviously represents the dirty and profane. In the conventional cultural ritual, wedding photographs are supposed to be perfect and taken in a beautiful setting; anything related to the wedding ritual is about happiness and

excitement. In contrast, pollution always brings a series of negative feelings to people, such as anger, discomfort, frustration, and so on.

Without a doubt, the juxtaposition of two operational symbols in the wedding photographs absolutely subverts people's conventional aesthetics and perceptions of wedding photographs. This polarized contrast has successfully triggered public affective resonance concerning local water pollution. Meanwhile, this juxtaposition also makes a connection between a significant life moment and an ongoing pollution problem, which helps us to reflect on the relation between human beings and nature. The wedding photographs also close the distance between spectators and environmental issues and remind us of the existence and extent of environmental problems.

#### 5.6.4 Visual comparison: a memory practice

Based on the interviews, some River Watchers frequently adopt the approach of visual comparison as a tactic to construct a public memory. In their everyday practice, some volunteers have captured the water quality at the same river for a long time, and have then presented the changes in water quality over a certain span by combining the images taken in the past and at present. For instance, one the interviewee Li Long recognized the combination of images as 'data collection' and expressed the following:

*'I recorded pollution in a same spot every time, showcasing on Weibo the changes of water pollution over time, what the original look of the pollution was, how it had been changed afterward and what the river looked like when the pollution had been stopped. I think there is quite a bit of data here. But I knew nothing about communication at that time, and the only thing we wanted to do is let the government know the issues ... I believe that we could make a comparison if we could pull all posted information together. We've found that there has been changes over time when we checking our posts, though our statistics is irregular. I think this is a kind of data'.*



Given the success of the wedding photographs next to an outfall, Hong Wu invited Song Wei and his family to take another set of family photographs at the same place in April 2018. On his WeChat public account, Hong Wu put the two sets of images together (Figures 5.7 and 5.8) and clarified the changes that have occurred in both the people and the river with commentary. In the interview, Hong Wu explained his purpose of making the comparison:

*‘In the wedding photos it was only he and his wife that were standing next to the outfall, and now the family has four people. Not just this family, the outfall also has a big change. It was full with back water and white bubbles, but it is clear now. All happened in 5 years’.*

Based on these two examples, it is evident that the visual comparison connects the spatial and temporal variability of water quality and constructs the memory that serves as a record and a reminder of what happened and continues to happen in a local environment. As a result, the audiences who were absent before are thus able to reach back into the past to see what the water pollution looked like. By displaying a history of the event, the memory plays a role in shaping and mediating social understanding of the local environmental issues.

For River Watchers, displaying a memory on social media is not only used to stimulate spectatorship but also to make their engagement more meaningful. In this case, through reflecting the positive changes, the visual comparison functions to provide proof of the impact of the campaign and confirm the contribution made by the volunteers. For example, in the published article on WeChat, Hong Wu wrote a commentary comparing the two sets of photographs:

*‘Persistence is victory, engagement brings changes ...Now Xinagjiang River has experienced an unprecedented change. Heavy metal industry areas are closed down, the dirty and smelly water contaminated by the sewage has become clear and clean, outfalls used to be toxic to the living things but now is covered with green plants ... the dream of transferring Xiangjiang River to the Rhine in Hunan is becoming true. Thanks for all who made contribution to it!’*



Figure 5.7: Wedding photograph taken in September 2013 (photo credits to Hong Wu).



Figure 5.8: Family photograph taken in April 2018 (photo credits to Hong Wu).

### 5.6.5 An image of a little boy: creation of a condensation symbol

In their everyday visual practice, River Watchers also attempt to articulate their appeals for water pollutions in local areas by creating visual symbols in their images. For example, when exchanging follow-up questions with the interviewee Yuan Genliang via WeChat instant messaging, he provided me with a screenshot of one of

his Weibo posts (see Figure 5.9) to show his creativity in expressing the environmental issue. Yuan Genliang is a full-time worker in a local state-run factory, and he joined the campaign because he wants to do something meaningful in his spare time. The post he provided is accompanied by three photographs of a little boy, and one of them (Figure 5.10) shows that the boy is holding the test result of water quality on a dark night. In order to protect his son's privacy, he has made the post invisible on Weibo and archived the photographs privately. In the interview, he explained why he took these photographs:

*'This boy is my kid. I brought my kid to the spot because test the water quality near the outfalls has become a part of my everyday life, so it is quite nature that my family members also engage in the activity'.*

Although the Weibo post did not have any sentimental or provocative captions to describe the photographs, the little boy functions as a visual condensation symbol to call for environmental justice. According to Kjeldsen (2016), the conception of condensation symbols was probably first mentioned by Edward Sapir (1934), and it refers to 'a highly condensed form of substitutive behaviour for direct expression, allowing for the ready release of emotional tension in conscious or unconscious form' (p. 493). Doris Graber (1976) furthered this definition to be of 'verbal condensation symbols', which refer to 'a name, word, phrase or maxim which stirs vivid impressions involving the listeners' most basic values' (p. 289). Compared with other ordinary symbols, a condensation symbol is more powerful to evoke people's emotions, memories, or anxieties about some event or situation (Edelman, 1964), due to its connectedness in context (Kaufer & Carley, 1993). In this case, the image of the little boy could be deployed as a visual condensation symbol for people's anxieties about local water pollution.



**Figure 5.9: A screenshot of Yuan Genliang’s Weibo post, which was published on 9 June 2014. Source provided by Yuan Genliang.**

**Translation of the post content: #XiangjiangRiverWatchers## #LvshuiMonitorStation, Xinxiawan Port, 22.00pm, 9th June 2014. Small amount of water, no colour, has floccules floated on the river, PH 7.**



**Figure 5.10: The photograph of a little boy (photo credit to Yuan Genliang).**

According to Dunaway (2015), children have long served as popular emotional symbols to visualize the invisible dangers or threats in environmental campaigns. In this case, Yuan Genliang also mentioned that there were chemical plants located upstream of the river, and before they were shut down, they often secretly discharged sewage at night. Therefore, in a bid to determine the pollution evidence, Genliang sometimes went to the spot with his family after dinner. It is a universal understanding that children are innocent and vulnerable. When a little boy becomes a key visual motif in an image, it explicitly delivers a message that all groups of citizens are equally vulnerable in the face of environmental damage.

There is another special connectedness with a historically rooted social perception that children are a reference to the future of human beings. In China, there is a well-known metaphor that ‘children are the flowers of the motherland’. In the domestic media, children are repeatedly depicted as the country’s treasured citizens and the hope of the country. Therefore, an image of a little boy holding a test result of water pollution and standing against a completely dark background implies that the future of our environment is in danger if the problem of pollution cannot be solved.

Connecting a child to the environmental issue in the images undoubtedly tells the audiences that protecting the environment is equivalent to protecting our children and our future. This implication cannot only evoke a sense of urgency about environmental protection but may also stir up parents’ empathy and concerns when seeing a child involved in environmental issues.

In addition, these photographs of a little boy can be recognized as an invitation to encourage more children to engage in the environmental campaign. Yuan Genliang explicitly told the media that he intentionally fosters his son to be an environmental volunteer in the future and hopes his son will continue his career of environmental protection.<sup>16</sup> In his book, Roger Hart (2013) has emphasized the necessity of involving children in local environmental practices in all countries and all communities and has pointed out that monitoring the physical environment is one of the ideal practices allowing children to see and understand many social issues. He

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<sup>16</sup> <http://wemedia.ifeng.com/56679410/wemedia.shtml>.

has also argued that children are able to play a durable and valuable role in environmental issues if their participation is treated seriously.

### 5.6.6 Scenery images: a visual pleasure supplement

In their campaign, River Watchers do not merely show the ugliness of environmental damage but also provide their audiences with a kind of visual pleasure via scenery images. For example, the senior citizen Yu Lixiang, who joined the campaign after his retirement, always posts beautiful images of the rivers he routinely patrols with poetic descriptions in both Weibo and WeChat friend circles. In his images, the beauty of nature can be represented by different subjects such as a clean river, a bunch of lotus, a magnificent bridge, a pavilion built on the lake, and so on. Unlike devastation, images highlighting the beauty of nature make the audiences feel clean, restful, delicate, and fair. In order to document a beautiful view, Yu Lixiang sometimes even deliberately avoids recording the polluted part of river water. In his opinion, the scenery images he captures function to *'mirror the ugliness of pollution ... awake more people's awareness to act and protect our beautiful homeland ... tell people that the life we have is beautiful and we should cherish the natural resources and protect the environment'*.

Visual pleasure in scenery photographs apparently inspires the audiences' love of nature and its beauty. Through restoring the original beautiful appearance of local surroundings, the scenery photographs play a role in reminding the audiences how the local environment is supposed to be. In the past decade, Chinese citizens have suffered from the consequences of environmental degradation caused by the dramatic development of industry. The scenery photographs attempt to remind us that the relation between humans and nature ought to be as harmonious as what Yu shows in his images and encourages us to live in a healthy environment and enjoy the scenic beauty of the world. In addition, constantly share the ugliness of pollution could repel the audiences, but the visual pleasure in scenery images can comfort people's anxious and restless emotions while facing the environmental damage as well as encourage people to reflect on their relations with nature in contemporary society.

In addition, scenery images have been employed as a tactical way to recruit campaign members and obtain social support. According to my interview with Zhou Yun, she has realized that the beautiful views of the local environment showcase the significant social change made by River Watchers. By reflecting the changes to the local environment, the scenery images imply to potential participants a sense of accomplishment that could be gained by joining the campaign. In this sense, the scenery images actually deliver the campaign's message that 'engagement brings change' to the public and also prove that ordinary people are capable of influencing environmental issues. In her interview, Zhou Yun commented on the role of scenery images in mobilizing the campaign:

*'Showing the positive changes to the public can encourage more local residents to join the campaign and raise their awareness on protecting the environment in our hometown. Actually, many people want to but are afraid to join our campaign ... some even think that what we are doing cannot solve the problems or raise the government concern'.*

## 5.7 Conclusion

Even though the environmental advocacy campaign seems to be depoliticized, the volunteers actually re-politicize it during the process of creating image events on social media. Due to the current institutional and political system, civic ENGOs have to play a role as a co-operator rather than an adversary of the government. Instead of mobilizing large-scale social movements, ENGOs always encourage their volunteers to take moderate means to against environmental injustice and defend their rights. In this case, it is evident that Green Hunan has adopted all necessary means to maintain the campaign from a depoliticized stance. However, the campaign has proved that simply and repeatedly documenting the reality of the issues is less likely to meet the affective needs of audiences regarding social issues and maintain long-term public attention on social media. To enhance the visibility of the campaign, River Watchers choose to '*make something different*' in everyday practice. Based on the analysis of visual rhetoric in the collected images, the volunteers have not merely embedded their dissent and appeals in the images but have also provided the audiences with 'an interesting version of reality' (DeLuca & Demo, 2000, p. 245) in order to create a social controversy. Therefore, this chapter argued that the environmental activists in

this case actually 'frame' rather than 'document' reality in their images. In the process of framing, River Watchers create affective power to increase the visual value in the image events in order to attract public attention. Although not every image created by River Watchers is capable of evoking public debate, the combination of image events and social media have provided ordinary people with a new possibility of engaging in public events in the context of China.



# Chapter 6 Conclusion: Understanding Visual Social Media, Affect, and Civic Engagement

This thesis investigated the role of everyday visual social media practice in facilitating the new bottom-up form of civic engagement in China. By studying three notable environmental cases, this research found that Chinese citizens have fully engaged their creativity in various forms of everyday visual content and circulated them on Weibo and WeChat to enhance the visibility of their voices. Adopting visual image to facilitate, mobilize, and organize environmental protests through media has been commonly practiced around the world. However, it is still significant for Chinese citizens to move towards a new form of civic engagement in the digital age. Drawing the findings of the case studies together, I argue that everyday visual content on social media has opened up an alternative space for civic engagement in China.

Because of the historical, political, and cultural differences, I must emphasize that the understanding of civic engagement in the context of China should be different from democratic countries. In the thesis, I define the new form of civic engagement as Chinese citizens articulating their everyday opinions about public events through producing and circulating diverse visual content on social media platforms. Although this networked civic engagement is personalized, issue-based, fragmented, and not sustained, it is meaningful in enhancing the visibility of hidden issues and fighting for environmental justice for Chinese citizens.

In order to elaborate on the argument, the last chapter of the thesis addresses the research questions proposed in the introductory chapter by linking the findings of the three case studies. This concluding chapter begins with a brief summary of the main findings and a restatement of the main arguments from case studies. Since image memory construction has been adopted to varying degrees in the three case studies,

this section also summarizes the commonalities and differences of image memory construction in articulating ordinary Chinese's opinions. In this section, I answer the first and second subsidiary research questions outlined in the introductory chapter through illustrating how ordinary Chinese create and circulate their opinions in the forms of citizen journalism, culture jamming, and image event on social media. The following section focuses on what this PhD study can contribute to our understanding of the relationship among affect and emotions, visual social media practices, and civic engagement in the context of China. To address the third and fourth subsidiary research questions, this section focuses on demonstrating that how affect and emotions effectively help Chinese citizens to connect distant social media users and enhance the visibility of their opinions. Finally, the chapter reflects on the limitations of the civic engagement enabled by visual social media and raises several questions on future research in relation to visual social media and civic engagement.

## 6.1 Thesis summary and main findings

By reviewing the existing literature in the second chapter, I summarized China's problematic environmental governance, the complexity of the internet censorship system, the unique advantages of visual social media practices in articulating ordinary people's everyday opinions, and the importance of affect and emotions in forming collective actions. In Chapter 2, I addressed the research gap in the role of everyday visual social media practices in moving Chinese citizens towards a new form of civic engagement. Moreover, I determined that one aim of the thesis was to integrate affect and emotions into visual social media practices, in order to illustrate the impact of visual social media practices in facilitating civic engagement in China.

In the third chapter, I drew upon the perspective of citizen journalism to examine the role of visual social media practices in times of disaster. Through exploring the case of the massive Tianjin explosions in 2015, I found that the participants performed a non-professional journalistic practice via storytelling. In the immediate aftermath of the explosions, the urgent demand for information from the citizens and the absence of professional journalists initially evoked citizen journalism practices. Although the disaster received extensive coverage by the domestic media afterwards, the

participants still actively updated the first-hand visual images and the stories behind them on WeChat.

By borrowing the concept of ‘gatewatcher’ from Axel Bruns (2018), I demonstrated that the local residents supplemented or supplanted the information of the 2015 Tianjin explosions through their non-professional journalistic practices. After the explosions, the media reports were highly controlled, and the public distrusted the official information. This is mainly because the Chinese government has a historical record of under-reporting and cover-ups following crisis events (Zeng et al., 2019). As a result, rumours were pervasive on Chinese social media. In these circumstances, the first-hand stories and visual images were used to refute rumours and break the information monopoly. Depending on their experiences and new values, the participants acted as gatewatchers to decide which stories should be heard. Other social media users were thus able to access unknown and unexpected information about the explosions. The other social media users who were previously uninformed were able to be more cognizant of what was happening at the scene of the explosions. The first-hand information received through trusted social networks on WeChat is often considered credible for outsiders.

More importantly, what makes the stories of the 2015 Tianjin explosions distinct in this thesis is that they completely focus on ‘us’: local residents who suffered in the disaster or contributed to the relief work. Storytelling is an essential part of human experience that occurs at all levels of society, and individuals discursively construct a community and imagine themselves as its members through sharing collective stories (Anderson, 1991). In this case, the emotional stories expressed the presences of the interviewees and feelings about how they perceived the impacts of the massive explosions. By embedding sadness and sympathy in the locally relevant stories and circulating them on WeChat, the participants shaped a strong sense of community and facilitated civic engagement at the neighbourhood level in a time of disaster. Confronting with information control, non-professional journalistic storytelling was also adopted as an intervention in the official discourse.

Structured around the idea of playful resistance, the fourth chapter examined the role of culture jamming in mocking the government’s unfilled responsibility to solve the

problem of air pollution in Beijing. Confronted with increasingly deteriorated air quality, local residents in Beijing prominently adopted culture jamming as an everyday response to express their dissent. Through appropriating and sabotaging well-known existing cultural and political materials, Chinese jammers creatively exploited humour and irony to condemn the government. Although none of the participants participated in producing the culture jamming, they expressed their opinions by circulating the images through their social media accounts during the period of smog.

In this chapter, I suggested that through producing and consuming culture jamming on social media, Chinese netizens have created an online carnival that 'is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 7). In this sense, I argued that Chinese netizens have built their own world in which to criticize the undesired environmental conditions freely by creating and circulating culture jamming, and that laughter driven by the humour and irony within the culture jamming is the core communicative power and a strategy to make the condemnation more visible in a world controlled by the government.

In Chapter 5, I explored the role of an image event in a social media-facilitated environmental advocacy campaign in Hunan Province, China. In this image-dominated online campaign, a group of grassroots environmental volunteers have prominently exploited the power of visual images to draw public attention to the issue of local water pollution through Weibo. Compared with the other two cases in the thesis, this one indicates a more complex relationship among three key sectors: the local government, ENGOs, and citizens. As scholars (P. Ho, 2007b; G. Yang & Calhoun, 2007) have stated, Chinese ENGOs and environmentalists consider themselves partners with the government, and China's environmentalism is thus characterized as depoliticized. In this case, the ENGO recruit volunteers help the local government monitor water pollution, which is mainly caused by the local chemical plants. The ENGO also designed an online communication agenda to ensure that the Weibo posts updated by volunteers report the issues accurately and rationally. To avoid the campaign attracting more public attention on social media, the local government officials opened an informal communication channel with the

volunteers. The volunteers have recognized directly reporting the issues to the officials via telephone calls and text messages and obtaining feedback in a short timeframe as their primary problem-solving approach.

However, due to the difficulty and complexity of environmental problem-solving, these volunteers do not always ‘partner’ with the local government. When the informal channel failed to solve the problems, the volunteers began to fight for environmental justice in their own way. According to the collected data, the volunteers have created image events on Weibo. J. W. Delicath and K. M. DeLuca (2003) have emphasized that image events are an argumentative practice intended to shape public opinions by ‘delivering unstated propositions, offering indirect claims, and advancing objections with dramatic imagery’ (p. 322). In this sense, I adopted visual rhetoric analysis as an approach to examine the propositions, claims, and objections behind the visual images. As a result, I argue that this group of grassroots volunteers have made an effort to enhance the visibility and influence of their voice by framing the reality of water pollution in everyday visual social media practice, and they have successfully re-politicized the campaign by creating image events on social media.

In addition, memory construction is another important visual social media practice adopted by the participants in the study, and it has been creatively unfolded in different forms. In the first case, because the domestic mass media were banned from reporting the one-year anniversary of the 2015 Tianjin explosions, most participants updated the visual images they took one year ago and shared the stories behind them on WeChat to commemorate the tragedy themselves. By presenting these memories, the participants intended to break the silence and remind people to remember what happened in the past. In the second and third cases, the participants constructed memories about the environmental issues through visual comparison. The forms of visual comparison are creative. In the case of Beijing smog, the participant Zou Yi made a composite of 365 photographs that were taken every morning at the same place to show a trajectory of the change in air quality during a year in Beijing. Additionally, the freelance photographer Song Juqiang and the environmental volunteer Hong Wu constructed memories by comparing the past and the present of environmental issues in order to emphasize the changes. The difference between the

two is that Song emphasizes the seriousness of the current air pollution by awakening people's memory of the good environment, while Hong proves the effectiveness of the campaign by presenting the river is clear from pollution.

In this study, I suggest that the participants challenged the transparency of information by constructing the memory of environmental issues. In the first and second cases, the information was highly controlled by the authorities, and the participants distrusted the official information. Therefore, visual images were used to break the information control and question the accuracy of official information. The memories of the environmental issues are communicated by eyewitness images. According to Barbie Zelizer (2007), viewers commonly consider the information delivered by eyewitness images to be credible and authoritative, because the participants experienced the moments of the events and the visual images were taken at the scene. Through playing a role as evidence to present a 'fact', mnemonic practices are used to challenge the transparency of information by making factual claims.

The three cases studied here have shed a light on the potential of visual social media in opening up a new form of civic engagement in China. Since civil organizations are highly controlled and have taken a non-confrontational stance towards the government, individuals play a vital role in hosting this networked form of civic engagement. Therefore, visual social media have become a critical tool for Chinese individuals articulating their voice and engaging in various forms of protests, campaigns, and social movements. Compared with selfies, memes, emojis. etc, the three forms of visual social media practices mentioned in this study is less dominantly used in previous China's civic engagement. However, the the forms of reflect the latest trend of how Chinese individuals engage in environmental issues in Chinese society.

The three case studies also led me to consider why visual content on social media is able to provide an alternative space for civic engagement. A key function of visual content in circumventing internet censorship is certainly an initial and basic factor. In China, internet censorship is an important barrier that limits the freedom of speech. Even worse, after living in such an online environment for years, self-censorship has

become deeply rooted in Chinese netizens' minds and changed their methods of everyday online communication. They carefully choose the subjects they wish to express and are quite cautious about the content of those expressions on social media. Due to the advantages of visual images in circumventing internet censorship, Chinese citizens are able to articulate their opinions relatively freely in this alternative space on social media platforms. However, as I have reiterated in the thesis, internet censorship is an important rather than the ultimate motivation that drives Chinese netizens to choose visual images when engaging in environmental issues. Beyond bypassing censorship, the main intention of the participants in adopting visual social media practices is to attract more attention to the environmental issues. In the context of China, it is fair to say that visual social media is one of few tools that can help ordinary Chinese to be heard.

Drawing together the findings from the case studies, I have demonstrated that these various visual social media practices are an example of creativity in the service of enhancing the visibility of ordinary people's opinions on social media. In this research, creativity is recognized as how participants craft and manage affect and emotions to evoke public attention in the visual images of environmental issues. Affect and emotions work as a form of capital (Ahmed, 2013). How affect and emotions are incorporated in visual images is connected with the processes of meaning-making. In this sense, I understand that incorporating affect and emotions in everyday visual images is intended to gain communicative value. However, what affect and emotions have been incorporated in the visual images responding to environmental issues? How are affect and emotions expressed, performed, and intentionally provoked by everyday visual content on social media? In the next section, this study strives to illustrate how visual social media pave the way for a new form of civic engagement in China.

## 6.2 Affect and emotions in networked civic engagement

Various affect and emotions have been exploited to facilitate the new form of civic engagement on China's social media. In digital society, there is no place like social media where affect and emotions are so abundant and foregrounded (Nikunen, 2019).

Due to its centrality on social media, visual images have become a prominent vehicle for exploring how affect and emotions are used to articulate, evoke, and circulate everyday opinions on environmental issues in China. In order to understand the considerable impact of visual social media on forming civic engagement, one aim of this thesis was to illustrate how affect and emotions were integrated into visual images by ordinary Chinese. Therefore, this section seeks to elaborate on what affect and emotions were strategically crafted in the various forms of visual images by ordinary Chinese and the significance of affect and emotions in facilitating the new form of civic engagement on social media.

Sadness and sympathy are the major emotions strongly presented in the non-professional journalistic practice of storytelling in the case of the 2015 Tianjin explosions. These emotions directly link to local residents' horror, grief, and even trauma. Unlike the conventional routines and values of journalism, which often keep some distance from emotions to maintain their objectivity (Pantti, 2010; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013), these non-professional journalistic practices produced emotional, subjective, and personalized forms of narrative, which are shaped by the vernacular of lived experience (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2016). In this case, the emotional stories mainly focus on the topics of the suffering of local residents, the contributions made by the volunteers, and young firefighters' sacrifices, which evoked sadness and sympathy to attract attention. At the same time, the eyewitnesses' visual images of the conditions on the ground moulded the authenticity and credibility of the stories. In the face of strict information control concerning the explosions, these non-professional journalistic practices gave local residents a voice and provided outsiders who may not have venues of access to first-hand information with opportunities to obtain such information. More importantly, through sharing the stories and emotions with trusted social networks on WeChat, the practice of non-professional journalistic storytelling formed a sense of community among local residents and thus invited more dialogue on the disaster.

In her book, Lillie Chouliaraki (2013) has proposed that the emotional appeals in humanitarian images in Western society have recently transformed from grand emotions into playfulness and reflexivity. This turn is also evident on China's social media. In the case of Beijing smog, ordinary people's emotional appeals regarding



the air pollution were prominently articulated in the form of culture jamming, which alters the familiar meaning of existing cultural and political materials in a playful style. By creating laughter in an ironic way, culture jamming attempts to convey people's anger and resistance. This is what Michael Mulkey (1988) has called the serious mode of humour. In this mode, humour is more used to show the changes that have occurred and create the expectation of future changes than whether it can bring people laugh (Sorensen, 2008). The serious intentions are present behind the humour. In the context of China, as an important strategy for criticizing the government's unfilled responsibility concerning air pollution, ironic humour helps creators and circulators to avoid the potential political risks. In this research, although there were no participants involved in the production of the culture jamming, they engaged in the issue via archiving and circulating.

In their social media-facilitated campaign, the grassroots volunteers called River Watchers attempted to create a shocking effect by framing the reality of water pollution in images. The solution to the water pollutions adopted by the River Watchers is aggregating public attention to hold the local authorities more accountable in preventing and improving water pollution by recording and circulating visual images on Weibo. To increase the effectiveness of information circulation, the volunteers quickly began to evoke public emotions by creating the images, although the ENGO designed an online communication agenda to keep the volunteers in a rational and non-confrontational stance. These everyday images amplify the severity of the issues, juxtapose incongruous elements, and construct the relationship between human beings and nature. Through creating shock effect, the images provoke despair, anger, and sympathy to attract more public attention. However, repeatedly emphasizing negative emotions is more likely to cause apathy, indifference, and compassion fatigue (Chouliaraki, 2013). Therefore, the volunteers have also emphasized hope to the public. For example, after successfully creating an image event of wedding photographs taken next to a polluted river, the volunteer Hong Wu invited the couple and their children to take group photographs of the family at the same place five years later. By presenting the improvement of the water quality in the images, the volunteers conveyed the feeling of hope to draw attention and encourage action.

## 6.3 Critical reflections

Affect and emotions embedded in visual social media practices have certainly made censorship difficult, bypassed the agenda set in the mainstream media, and enhanced the individualization of civic engagement in China. It is no exaggeration to say that visual content on social media has become an alternative place that allows comparatively free speech on ‘politically sensitive’ topics to exist. In China, environmental activism often performed on social media. However, as the central government has increasingly strengthened control over the society, it is rarely to see environmental protests occurred neither online nor offline in recent years. In this circumstance, with a variety of visual affordances, visual social media and mobile technologies have provided individuals with new possibilities and a lower threshold to engage in environmental issues, particularly for grassroots and marginalized groups who have very limited cultural and social capital. Within visual social media, China’s environmental activism emerged a series of new practices. It is fair to say that there is not much public space like visual social media could allow the environmental activism to exist in the context of China.

The three interesting cases in the thesis have proven that Chinese individuals are able to discuss and comment on public affairs and even negotiate with the government because they have been informed and empowered by visual social media. However, this alternative space for civic engagement is contingent and ephemeral. More importantly, the hope that visual social media practices will achieve any genuine political or social changes to Chinese society is slim. In this sense, in order to examine the civic implications of visual social media and reflect on its limitations, this section focuses on discussing the extent to which visual social media could enhance the visibility of Chinese individuals’ articulation and empower individuals to require the government to be more transparent and accountable.

The three empirically based and theoretically grounded cases studied here demonstrate that the extent of networked civic engagement depends on the nature of the environmental issues rather than on how creatively the visual social media practices were employed. The 2015 Tianjin explosions were a human-induced tragedy that killed hundreds of people and caused severe environmental and health

consequences in the local area. Since the disaster had great potential to trigger large-scale protests and challenge the legitimacy of the current political power, the authorities implemented harsh control over the mainstream media and social media and left no space for negotiation. In comparison, it seems that the government is more willing to negotiate in the case of Beijing smog and River Watchers. In particular, because the central government relies on civil organizations to hold the local governments accountable on environmental governance, the civic organizations and environmental volunteers have thus obtained the legitimacy to negotiate with local officials on the issue of water pollution via both formal and informal channels.

The participatory form of civic engagement enabled by visual social media practices is self-organized and personalized. In the face of internet censorship and information control over mainstream media, visual social media and mobile technologies allow diverse voices including ‘lived, private experiences and emotions’ (W. Chen & Reese, 2015, p. 6) to be articulated in public. In the three cases studied, the participants spontaneously and pragmatically played the roles of producer, distributor, and critic to engage in the environmental issues. In this sense, I suggest that the actions formed by visual social media practices as addressed in this thesis are connective rather than collective. As Zizi Papacharissi (2015) has stated in her book, collective action requires a negotiation of a certain meaning, consequences, and a particular ideology. Without coordination, consensus-building, and leadership (Papacharissi, 2015), the form of civic engagement in this research is ‘inclusive of different personal reasons for contesting a situation that needs to be changed’ (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 744). Although the online campaign was initially organized and mobilized by the local ENGO in the case of the River Watchers, the volunteers actually had more autonomy to make their voices audible on social media by framing the reality of water pollution in their everyday images. In this sense, the visual social media practices connectively rather than collectively formed individuals’ consensuses around the environmental issues. Without a central decision-making authority, visual social media-facilitated connective actions are thus able to diffuse information easily and quickly.

In addition, the three cases studied reveal that the limitation of the participatory form of civic engagement is that its eventual impact is contingent and ephemeral. The

extent to which individuals are able to make their articulations visible on social media depends on whether they can attract attention from national elites and mass media. Embedding a variety of affect and emotions in visual content has become a prevalent tactic adopted by ordinary Chinese to make their voices heard and even push the boundaries set by the authorities. While focusing on specific local demands, a few examples in the thesis have successfully extended the geographic outreach through domestic and even global media coverage. However, apart from the River Watchers case, which is supported by the ENGO, the trajectory and eventual impact of the civic engagement in the other two cases is ephemeral. More importantly, ordinary Chinese have no intention of challenging the legitimacy of the government when they connectively respond to environmental issues via visual social media practices.

With the prevalence of visual images on social media today, it is evident that civic engagement is more visual than in the past around the world. This thesis captures a new form of participation in environmental issues at the level of everyday life afforded by visual social media. In the visual social media-enabled alternative space, ordinary Chinese across the country are connected to compete with official discourse and struggle for visibility and legitimacy of articulation. With the help of visual social media and mobile technologies, the new form of networked civic engagement generates and sustains public discussions on contentious issues filtered by the authorities. Ordinary Chinese speaking out contentiously on China's social media have to contend with censorship, political regulations, and potential risks. Therefore, these conditions force Chinese citizens to think carefully about what kinds of actions they can engage in (Spires, 2011). Though the eventual impact of the new form of civic engagement is contingent and ephemeral, it allows previously unseen opinions and discussions to exist and be heard and simultaneously provides citizens with a relatively safe place to avoid potential political risks. However, due to the increasing development of censorship technologies for images, I am also concerned that the form of civic engagement enabled by visual social media will be more difficult in the future.

Concerning the increasingly important role of visual social media in Chinese society, there are a few questions that could become the subject of further research. First,

Susan Sontag (2003) is concerned that the proliferation of images of suffering has led to compassion fatigue, which undermines people's feelings, connections, and actions. In this sense, although visual social media practices are newly emerged in China, what if the public is fatigued with the existing visual representations of environmental issues? Are visual social media practices still able to facilitate civic engagement in China? Second, with the rapid rise of short-form mobile videos on apps like Tiktok in recent years, it appears that the environment on China's visual social media has become entertainment-focused and commercialized. Although civic engagement can be facilitated by unexpected forms and actors on the internet (W. Chen & Reese, 2015), how do ordinary Chinese engage in public affairs on the new visual social media?

In summary, based on three notable and interesting environmental cases, this thesis has illustrated the power of visual social media in facilitating the networked form of civic engagement and opened the door to more specific and in-depth discussions of the social, cultural, and political impact of networked civic engagement in the context of China. From the perspective of environmental participation, this thesis has demonstrated the importance of the unique combination of visual images and affect to make powerful statements, evoke public resonance, and accelerate information circulation in the context of China. In visual social media studies, however, more scholars are still needed to draw attention to the role that visual images and affectivity play in relation to connective actions.

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# Appendix 1: Interview Questions

1. After the environmental issues occurred, what visual materials (such as picture, video, geographic location, etc.), have you posted on Chinese social media platforms, such as Weibo and WeChat?
2. If you indicated your geographic information when you posted those visual materials on social media, could you please tell me why?
3. Is there any textual content matching with the posted visual materials?
4. Have your posts of the environmental issues caused any responses from other netizens, such as re-post, comment and like etc.?
5. Why do you use visual social media to response to relevant environmental issues?
6. Among these social media accounts you are following, what type of visual content impressed you when environmental issues occurred? Why?
7. What visual content you have re-posted or commented on Weibo or WeChat when the environmental issues occurred? Why?
8. Do you think you can achieve your anticipated goals through by using visual social media? Why?
9. What visual content that you either posted or followed has been deleted? Have they been censored or deleted voluntarily?
10. After the environmental issues occurred, have you posted any relevant visual content on foreign social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram? If you have, can you please tell me why?

# Appendix 2: Participant Consent Form

## CONSENT FORM

<b>HREC Project Number:</b>	HER2016-0263
<b>Project Title:</b>	Visual Social Media and Vernacular Responses to Environmental Issues in China
<b>Principal Investigator:</b>	Dr. Tama Leaver (Senior Lecturer)
<b>Student researcher:</b>	Shanshan Liu
<b>Version Number:</b>	1
<b>Version Date:</b>	25 July 2016

- I have read, *{or Shanshan Liu has read to me in my first language}*, the information statement version listed above and I understand its contents.
- I believe I understand the purpose, extent and possible risks of my involvement in this project.
- I voluntarily consent to take part in this research project.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and I am satisfied with the answers I have received.
- I understand that this project has been approved by Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee and will be carried out in line with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007).
- I understand I will receive a copy of this Information Statement and Consent Form.
- I consent to give the permission that all the visual materials I provide can be used in the researcher's thesis, academic conference and publications.

Participant Name	
Participant Signature	
Date	

Declaration by researcher: I have supplied an Information Letter and Consent Form to the participant who has signed above, and believe that they understand the purpose, extent and possible risks of their involvement in this project.



Researcher Name	Shanshan Liu
Researcher Signature	
Date	