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# Complaining and sharing personal concerns as political acts: how everyday talk about childcare and parenting on online forums increases public deliberation and civic engagement in China

Yu Sun , Todd Graham , and Marcel Broersma 

## ABSTRACT

Based on a comparative content analysis of political talk in three popular Chinese online forums (government-run, commercial-lifestyle, and commercial-topical), this paper investigates how the private and public spheres are connected thru everyday talk about childcare concerns. Compared to the government-run (party-state) forum, the nonpolitical (lifestyle and topical) forums created open and inclusive ‘third spaces’ for citizens to engage in child welfare politics. In such spaces, the reason, rule-based deliberation was not the dominant communicative practice. Rather, political (narrative) acts of complaining and sharing personal concerns – grounded in citizens’ life experiences – were the norm, capturing and recognizing public problems in the private sphere. We argue that to understand the nature of political talk in Chinese third spaces, communicative acts that have not been considered central to deliberative reasoning, such as complaining and sharing personal concerns should be given more normative importance.

## KEYWORDS

Online deliberation; everyday political talk; third spaces; the public sphere; China

## Introduction

With the fundamental social and economic transformations that Chinese society has gone through in the past decade, childcare and parenting issues have become an important socio-political topic. In this study, we argue that everyday online discussions about these concerns that families face, increasingly bridge the private life of Chinese citizens and the public domain, and thus foster civic engagement. At present, China has a strict internet censorship system, which constrains citizens’ freedom to post things that may potentially lead to collective action or protest while tolerating a certain amount of public grievances toward the government and policy issues (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). As a consequence, the boundaries between the public and private sphere are constantly contested and (re-)negotiated in online exchanges. Sun (2012), for example, has shown how Chinese migrant workers use digital devices to share their private life and working experiences, speak out on the social inequality they suffer, and develop alternative discourses in the public realm.

Such developments have important implications for the public sphere. On the one hand, this is a domain where the state calls upon citizens to argue in the country’s interest and place their personal troubles second to the public good. Yet, at the same time, space has come into place where citizens, within certain limitations, can defend their private interests (Wong, 1997). This constant maneuvering between control and a certain level of openness is part and parcel of official government policy, which carefully tries to guide processes of modernization to safeguard stability in society (Noesselt, 2014).

Against this backdrop, this paper investigates citizen deliberation and social-civic communications by examining everyday online political talk about childcare and parenting issues. We explore the extent to which a public sphere emerges when private concerns become public issues as a result of the family-state dynamics in everyday life. Despite the links they have with child welfare policies, educational resources, and legislation on child

protection, childcare and parenting are considered private issues, which fall short of state support in China today. Although these issues tend to be discussed as personal concerns in mundane spaces of everyday life, they have, in the past, generated political talk about state policies, bringing everyday life politics into the public arena and blurring the public-private boundaries. Besides, they provide Chinese citizens with opportunities to gather and discuss societal issues in the social arena, beyond explicitly political spaces that are heavily controlled by the state.

In current scholarship on the Chinese internet's political impact on society, most studies have focused on the explicitly political which normally involves formal politics of the state: either resistance (Zhang & Zheng, 2009; Zheng & Wu, 2005) or government control (Morozov, 2011). This body of research tends to be constrained within dichotomous binaries such as political versus nonpolitical, and control versus resistance. Everyday online practices, which do not necessarily involve the state, are neglected in these approaches.

In this article, we move beyond formal political spaces by studying Chinese citizens' everyday communicative practices (i.e., informal political talk). We examine how the 'political' emerges in everyday conversation across three popular online discussion forums. We then study the nature of such talk on lifestyle issues, and childcare and parenting specifically, focusing on both its deliberative and informal characteristics. Finally, the paper seeks to answer how the different aims and characteristics of the forums impact the nature of everyday political talk. Our research shows that online 'third spaces' have emerged in nonpolitical discussion forums where citizens can come together to talk about daily life issues, such as raising children and other everyday activities. Rooted in these mundane conversations, counter-discourses emerge that indirectly engage and negotiate with child welfare policies in the Chinese third space.

### **The theory of the public sphere and deliberative democracy**

The public sphere is a social realm where citizens get together, deliberate matters of common concern, and form public opinion (Habermas, 1989).

According to Habermas's (1984) theory of communicative action, it is political talk, generating communicative rationality, through which people learn what their own interests are, what concerns others, and what fits the common good. Deliberative democratic theory has been strongly influenced by Habermas's concept of communicative rationality and his notion of the public sphere. Under such models, rational critical debate is considered the dominant form of communication. Formal models of deliberation and the public sphere have received much criticism because of the exclusions based on gender, social-economic status, and race (Fraser, 1990). Moreover, as Eckersley (2001) argues, the notion of deliberation is "Western/Eurocentric in its orientation in insisting only on certain modes of rational, critical argument in political discourse."

Coleman and Blumler (2009) assert that the formal deliberation grounded in an ideal deliberative procedure is "more suitable to the Senior Common Room than the workplace, community hall or public square" (p. 36). Pointing out the limitations of formal deliberations, they call for a "more deliberative democracy" that would "take seriously a range of forms of public talk, from the informal and conversational to the consultative and evidential" (Coleman & Blumler, 2009, p. 38). The significance of informal political talk for deliberative democracy has been illustrated in Habermas's (1996) *Between Facts and Norms*; he argues that "deliberative politics proceeds along two tracks that are at different levels of opinion- and will- formation, the one constitutional, the other informal" (p. 314). Political talk in the public sphere is more sensitive to the problems of the society and provides "a medium of unrestricted communication" (Habermas, 1996, p. 308) through which citizens could adequately articulate their struggles of needs and practice their collective identity without procedural confines.

As "communicative actions" in the public sphere, non-purposive and unstructured political talk should be different from rule-based deliberation and rational debates, maintains Habermas (1984). In everyday political talk (informal deliberation), the reaching of mutual understandings among participants relies upon the background of the lifeworld. When people put forward validity claims or arguments about the problematized

issues, it is always related to the pre-conceived interpretations that can find evidence in the everyday lifeworld (Habermas, 1987). In Habermas's concept of communicative rationality, the lifeworld is important because it points out the social and cultural conditions that might inhibit or facilitate communicative actions in the public sphere. In other words, communicative rationality intertwined with aspects and practices of everyday life fosters a social sphere of public reasoning that is known as the public sphere (Habermas, 1996).

Different from the public sphere separating the state and society in Western countries, there is no such separate sphere between state and society in China. However, a relatively autonomous social-cultural space, *minjian* society (min means people; jian means betweenness), intermediates between state and society. *Minjian* implies a more harmonious relationship than the exchange of opposite views, promoted in the Western concept of the public sphere. It is made up of informal social relationships such as kinship, friendship, and *guanxi* (relationship-based) networks through which everyday citizens are self-organized.

In the social sphere of *minjian*, a patriarchal (male-dominated) power system plays an important role in shaping the social logic and ways of organizing people's everyday life. In Chinese politics, patriarchal social relations are embodied in the relationship between state and citizens. In the authoritarian governance system, the state is not an entity that citizens need to balance and make accountable but a power they seek reliance and cooperation with. Rather than functioning in the logic of civil legality and rule of law, the paternalistic system responds to citizens based on *qing* (sentiment), *li* (reason), and *fa* (legality), with legality as the weakest type of appeal among the three; but, even when the legal system works, people do not regard it as a tool of protecting individual rights but a mechanism of state governance (Chen, 2003). With the conflicts existing between *li* (reason) and *qing* (sentiment), rationality which defines the quasi-legal principle of Western citizenship is a less dominant principle in *minjian* society (Wang, 2019).

Sass and Dryzek (2014) argue that the deliberative effect of communicative acts is determined by the specific social-cultural context in which it is

embedded, rather than by the act of exchanging views itself. Thus, in our study, we move beyond the (Western) normative conditions of deliberation and pay particular attention to the social-civic communicative forms rooted in the Chinese social-cultural world. For instance, Chinese citizens often employ the speech act of complaining to express their dissatisfactions with the state regarding particular public issues due to the lack of opportunities to participate in collective action. As a form of citizen dialogue with state institutions, complaints shed light on citizens' subjectivities, civic practices, and power relations (Sun, Graham & Broersma, 2018, 2020). By taking into account these social-cultural codes that afford communicative acts significance and meanings in the authoritarian context of China, we aim to study how local social-civic culture meets Western norms of deliberation and the public sphere. Based on the empirical study, we then explore the possibilities to overcome the normative bias embodied in the theory of the public sphere and deliberative democracy.

### Everyday political talk, third space, and Chinese internet

As an important way for citizens to interact with other citizens in the 'potential spaces of democracy' (Coleman, 2007, p. 57), everyday talk plays a crucial role in citizens' political life. By helping them to be more informed about public affairs, it encourages citizens to develop their subjectivities and understand others, and promotes the exchange of preferences among citizens (Conover & Searing, 2005; Kim & Kim, 2008). This prepares them to conduct formal deliberations. Wright (2012) proposes the concept of third space, referring to the place wherein everyday political talk largely occurs. Drawing upon Oldenburg's (1989) notion of third place, the third space, in Wright's re-theorization, consists of a nonpolitical online discussion space where political talk emerges.

Third spaces do not have a clear political purpose per se but become political when personal life and politics get connected during everyday conversations (Wright, Graham, & Jackson, 2015). As observed in previous studies, nonpolitical third spaces are of great significance for political

engagement (Graham, 2012; Graham, Jackson, & Wright, 2015; Sun, Graham, & Broersma 2018, 2020; Yan, Sivakumar, & Xenos, 2017). Bridging the personal and the political sphere, such third spaces nurture social-civic communications, such as social and expressive gestures that intersect with politics (Highfield, 2016). Consequently, such social-civic forms of discourse emerging from the nonpolitical space add new political meanings, thus contributing to a more integrated and inclusive public sphere.

The internet-based everyday sphere may be of more significance in the Chinese context than in Western countries. Unlike Western states where public participation is institutionalized by civic organizations, state-registered organizations in China play a limited role in promoting civic engagement as they are dependent on the state (Chan & Qiu, 1999). Due to the lack of autonomy of civic organizations, not all voices are channeled through the associational networks of civil society into the public sphere. In light of the lack of formal channels for political participation in China, informal and small-scale discursive spaces are considered important alternative structures through which civic engagement potentially can occur (Zhang, 2006). In the current socio-political context of China and with the internet increasingly penetrating people's everyday lives, the most significant public value of the internet might be that it opens up alternative spaces for citizens to informally participate in politics (Yang, 2009; Yang & Calhoun, 2007).

Witnessing the rapid diffusion of the internet in Chinese society, scholars have long debated the potential impacts of such change for politics and civic engagement. Some scholars believe that it promises a booming online public sphere where public deliberation emerges. They argue that the internet has diversified discourses in public discussions (Lewis, 2013); contributed to counter-discourses in online deliberation (Jiang, 2010; Yang & Calhoun, 2007) and thus opened an important venue for political deliberation about societal issues (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2015). However, skeptics question these narratives, pointing toward the political inactiveness of Chinese citizens (Leibold, 2011), the uncivil nature of the Chinese internet (Jiang & Esarey, 2018), and the like-

minded communications in absence of deliberative interactions (Medaglia & Yang, 2017). Moreover, Damm (2007) asserts that their preference for consumerism, leisure, and lifestyle issues has rendered Chinese internet users' online practices apolitical. While they avoid involvement in subversive politics, they gather online with people who share their narrow interests, identify with them, and create isolated niches online, leading to the fragmentation of Chinese society.

Thus far, the literature on the political implications of the Chinese internet has demonstrated that it shows deliberative potentials, but also supports uncivil and apolitical practices. At the same time, a third group of scholars considers the internet as a tool of authoritarian control, suppressing online political expressions by using various controlling tactics such as computer censorship systems, adaptive strategies, and real-name registration policies (Kalathil & Boas, 2003; Morozov, 2011). Although previous studies have contributed valuable insights in understanding the dynamics of information technology, politics, and society, they mainly constrain their focus on the power dynamics within the conventional sphere of politics. They do not pay sufficient attention to the complex and plural nature of the Chinese internet, overlooking communicative practices that do not necessarily involve the state but relate to power relations at the micro-level in the everyday life context. As Han (2015a, 2015b) illustrates, social actors, such as ordinary citizens who are not resistant against the state nor supportive of state propaganda, can influence the process of public opinion formation. Referring to Yang's (2014) proposal of 'deep Internet studies,' which calls for attention to the emergence of multiple forms of being political in citizens' mundane digital practices at the micro-level, we move beyond the boundaries of the nonpolitical and the political, and the private and the public. Our focus on political talk provides a new empirical context to study citizen interactions and allows us to unravel the complexity of the Chinese online public sphere.

### Research focus and method

Online discussion forums (BBS forums) provide communicative spaces for Chinese citizens to get together and talk about everyday life issues,

thus fostering an interactive social space for public discussions. Embracing the informal characteristics of everyday conversation, everyday political talk is inclusive to multiple forms of communication, rather than being confined to formal deliberation (Wright et al., 2015). Therefore, in the study, we develop an inclusive analytical framework to assess the nature of online political talk. Because Habermas's ideas of communicative action and the general public sphere offer a systematic critical theory addressing issues concerning media and democracy (Dahlberg, 2004), we first analyze the deliberativeness of online political talk as set-out by Habermas (1984, 1989). This allows us to see whether what constitutes the public sphere envisioned by Habermas can be localized in the Chinese social-cultural context. We also examine social-civic communicative practices anchored in everyday social-civic culture beyond the norms of deliberation. This inclusive analysis enables us to focus on the social-cultural prerequisites of public deliberation and civic engagement, moving beyond the confines of the Western (formal) framework of deliberation. By putting forward the particular Chinese social-cultural context, it provides possibilities to incorporate new aspects of reality into the expansion of Western public deliberation theory, constructing a more integrated notion of the public sphere. Consequently, the following research questions are addressed in this article:

RQ1. To what extent does political talk in Chinese online forums meet the conditions of deliberation as outlined in public sphere theory?

RQ2. What social-civic communicative practices beyond the framework of deliberation emerge in everyday political talk?

In this study, we compare the nature of political talk about childcare and parenting issues across three popular Chinese forums with diverging aims and characteristics to improve our understanding of communication and participation in online spaces. As revealed previously, platform features influence the nature

of online discussions (Esau, Frieß, & Eilders, 2017). This leads us to our hypothesis:

H1. The different aims and characteristics of the three forums will differently impact the nature of everyday political talk.

### **The three forums**

*Qiangguo Luntan* (Strengthening the Nation Forum), a party-state forum, is hosted by the official online media branch of *People's Daily*. The forum is perceived as an important political instrument of the party and state. It functions as a feedback mechanism for the central government, collecting citizens' opinions about public policies and local developments. As a governmental forum, it is perceived by citizens as a place where they can talk about policy issues and the government can hear their voice.

*Baidu Tieba*, literally meaning a 'post bar,' a commercial-lifestyle forum, was started in 2003 by the Chinese search engine company, *Baidu*. *Tieba* became popular among grassroots users because of its entertainment orientation. As one of the most popular lifestyle/hobby-based online communities, this forum is open and accessible to the every individual.

*Yaolan*, a commercial-topical forum, was established in 1999 to help parents deal with problems in different stages of parenthood. As embodied by its name, which means cradle in Chinese, it covers topics related to pregnancy, health and nutrition, childcare, and education. *Yaolan* is one of the top parenting forums in China, providing a social place for (young) parents to gather together and talk about parenting and childcare issues.

### **Sampling**

To capture the informal and everyday nature of political talk in nonpolitical spaces, a broader definition of the political has to be considered (Wright, 2012). Wright et al. (2015, p. 74) develop a more expansive notion of political talk, referring it to "something that a) emerges in the process of everyday talk, often interweaved with conversations that do not have a political character; b) includes

mundane reflections upon power, its uses and ramifications; c) possesses qualities that enable it to contribute to meaningful public action.” To identify political talk about childcare issues in non-political spaces, the procedures developed by Graham (2008) were borrowed: a thread containing posts, where participants relate their life experience and concerns to the wider community, and meanwhile stimulate replies from other participants, was selected.

Specifically, inspired by Wright’s (2018) sampling method for identifying political talk in non-political online spaces, we developed keywords to identify threads where political talk about childcare and parenting emerged (see Appendix 1). The keywords are closely associated with issues such as child food safety, child abuse, and left-behind children in rural areas, which link child-rearing experiences to societal issues discussed in the public realm. Using the keywords, we retrieved threads related to childcare and parenting issues. Then we proceeded to select randomly 25 threads per forum after checking there are indeed political discussions emerging from those threads. Threads were initially collected during 2015. However, for the two nonpolitical forums, we had to extend the time-frame to 2013 to allow for the collection of 25 threads as a means of maintaining the comparability of our sample. The *Qiangguo Luntan* sample consisted of 616 posts. Discussions on this party-state forum often began with topics of explicit political nature, such as child welfare policies and relevant news. The *Tieba* sample consisted of 1128 posts. Everyday talk on *Tieba* was mainly about families’ daily experiences regarding childcare and parenting. For *Yaolan*, the sample consisted of 691 posts, mostly originating from participants’ private family concerns.

### Content analysis

A content analysis was adopted as the primary method for examining the nature of online political talk. A two-part coding scheme was developed to assess the deliberativeness of political talk (RQ1) while capturing and examining other social-civic communicative practices (RQ2). The unit of analysis was the individual post, and all posts were coded

within the context of the thread in which they were situated.

Based on Habermas’s theory of communicative action and the public sphere (Habermas, 1984, 1989), we first investigated the deliberativeness of political talk. Drawing from the coding scheme developed in the field of online deliberation (Graham, 2008; Graham, Jackson, & Wright, 2016; Friess & Eilders, 2015; Stromer-Galley, 2007), we operationalize the following normative conditions: the process of rational-critical debate (*rationality*, *continuity*, and *convergence*), dispositional requirements for achieving mutual understanding (*reciprocity* and *sincerity*), and the norms of debate (*discursive equality*).

As pointed out by Coleman and Moss (2012), existing research about online political talk has paid much attention to the procedural and substantive rationality, while ignoring other forms of civic expressions that could be considered as deliberative. Subsequently, we move beyond the normative framework of deliberation by applying a second group of coding categories that are rooted in a literature review and were further developed in a pilot study. Building off of the real-world approach for analyzing online political talk in non-political spaces (Graham, Jackson, & Wright, 2015), we applied qualitative content analysis, which used both deductive and inductive coding techniques (e.g., through the use of ‘feedback loops’) during the pilot study, to capture other common ingredients of online political talk in China (Mayring, 2000). By closely reading and analyzing the texts, new categories (social-civic forms of communication) that emerge in everyday talk were developed, such as complaining and storytelling. The social-civic communicative forms included: *complaining*, *storytelling*, *advice-giving/helping*, and *social talk*. The coding categories and measures are discussed below.<sup>1</sup>

To improve the reliability of the coding scheme, correcting measures were adopted at different stages of development. As mentioned above, a pilot study was done to test the initial coding scheme for functionality, to see whether the normative indicators could be operationalized to code posts on Chinese forums, and to observe and identify new communicative practices. Next, an inter-coder reliability test was conducted on a random



sample of 12% of the collected threads, to test the consistency of the coding scheme. Calculating using Scott's Pi, coefficients met appropriate acceptance levels ranging from .70 to .92 with *convergence* and *questionable sincerity* achieving perfect scores.

## Findings

In this section, we present our findings from the content analysis. Based on the coding scheme outline above, it is divided into two parts. In order to provide more depth to the analysis, the quantitative findings are supplemented by qualitative examples, when applicable, to demonstrate some key tendencies.

### Normative conditions of deliberation

To examine the deliberativeness of everyday political talk, we first investigated the level of *rationality*. Rationality refers to participants' use of reasoning to justify their views/claims, a crucial element of the Habermasian public sphere. We measured rationality based on the presence or absence of the following characteristics: posts that were on topic, which contained an explicit assertion supported by an expressed justification, which provided external evidence such as facts, sources, examples, or personal experiences, were coded as *reasoned claims*.

As Table 1 reveals, the exchange of claims accounted for 68.0% of *Qiangguo Luntan*'s posts. However, non-reasoned claims (assertions) represented nearly two-thirds of these. Although

*Qiangguo Luntan* participants often expressed their views on childcare issues, assertions were the most prevalent speech act, accounting for 41.9% of posts while reasoned claims represented 26.1%. On *Tieba*, the exchange of claims was less frequent compared to *Qiangguo Luntan*, accounting for 35.6% of posts. However, *Tieba* participants tended to be more rational than *Qiangguo Luntan* participants with assertions accounting for substantially less of the total claims made (42% compared to 62%). That said, the use of assertions was more common than reasoned claims among *Tieba* participants, representing 20.8% of posts compared to 14.8%. Finally, similar to *Tieba*, the exchange of claims accounted for 37.3% of *Yaolan*'s posts. Again, it was the use of non-reasoned claims that was most common in *Yaolan*, representing a fourth (25.3%) of all posts compared to 12.0% for reasoned claims.

Our next two indicators under the process of rational-critical debate were *continuity* and *convergence*, which requires that participants engage in rational-critical debate until some form of agreement is achieved. First, the level of extended debate was measured via the presence of *strong-strings* (the depth of argument exchange). A strong-string refers to a minimum of a three-argument interaction. We measured convergence – the level of agreement achieved during political talk – by identifying commissive speech acts.

As Table 1 indicates, on *Qiangguo Luntan*, the level of continuity and convergence was low; extended debate accounted for only 4.9% of posts while acts of convergence were rare (0.2%). When extended debate did occur, it was on threads initiated by ordinary netizens (issues they raised) rather than threads on news/policy initiated by the forum staff. On *Tieba*, extended debate was much more common than on *Qiangguo Luntan* with 14% of posts involved in strong-string interactions. For example, *Tieba* participants actively engaged in extended debate on the issue of whether parents should buy houses in 'good' school zones as a means of gaining access to quality education for their children. However, even in these threads, acts of convergence were rare, accounting for 1.5% of all posts. Similar to *Qiangguo Luntan*, the level of extended debate

**Table 1.** Indicators of Deliberation (%).

Indicator	Qiangguo Luntan (N = 616)	Tieba (N = 1128)	Yaolan (N = 691)
Reasoned claims	26.1	14.8	12.0
Non-reasoned claims (assertions)	41.9	20.8	25.3
Continuity	4.9	14	3.0
Convergence	0.2	1.5	0.0
Reciprocity (replies)	15.7	53.1	70.2
Questionable sincerity	0	0	0
Degrading	1.9	0.8	0

Note: We used chi-square tests to identify differences across the three forums. Only the results of key indicators of deliberation are listed: For claims,  $\chi^2(2, N = 2435) = 188.32, p < .001$ ; For reciprocity,  $\chi^2(2, N = 2435) = 404.27, p < .001$ ; For continuity,  $\chi^2(2, N = 2435) = 80.19, p < .001$ .

on *Yaolan* was low, representing 3.0% of posts; there were no acts of convergence.

Our second set of indicators – *reciprocity* and *sincerity* – refer to the dispositional requirements of listening and achieving mutual understanding. Put simply; reciprocity requires that participants read and respond to each other's posts. We measured it based on whether a post was a reply to another post. Posts were coded as replies if they responded to another post directly (via the platform's reply function) or indirectly (latently responding to another post without using the reply function). Sincerity requires that all claims, arguments, and information provided during the discussion be sincere and truthful. However, since it is difficult to judge if posters are telling the truth, this condition was measured by identifying those instances when participants challenged or expressed doubt concerning the truthfulness/sincerity of another participant's posts.

As Table 1 shows, the level of replies on *Qiangguo Luntan* was low; replies accounted for 15.7% of posts. However, reciprocity was much higher in both the commercial-lifestyle and commercial-topical forums; 53.1% and 70.2% of *Tieba* and *Yaolan*'s posts were coded as replies. Overall, the results indicate that participants were more reciprocal in the forums that were more social than political in nature. On *Tieba* and *Yaolan*, citizens frequently engaged in mutual exchanges with fellow participants, contributing to the building of an online community. Thus, when political talk emerged, it was a more reciprocal affair on these forums than on *Qiangguo Luntan*. Regarding sincerity, in all three forums, our analysis identified no posts that challenged/questioned one's sincerity. This does not mean that participants' posts were necessarily a true reflection of their own opinions. For instance, online commentators hired by the government, the 'fifty-cent army' (Han, 2015b, p. 111), may manipulate the process of public discussion to guide public opinion by employing purposeful framing and discursive strategies. As Han points out, netizens sometimes can detect such commentators based on their blatant pro-government tone. We did not have any reasons to assume that this was the case, however.

Moreover, these commentators are less likely to engage in debates on non-contentious (thought to be private) issues like childcare and parenting, especially in social orientated forums such as *Tieba* and *Yaolan*.

Our final condition was *discursive equality*, which deals with the norms and rules of debate. It requires that participants respect and recognize each other as having an equal voice/standing within the deliberative process. We measured discursive equality based on the presence or absence of *degrading* comments: posts that degrade – to lower in character, quality, esteem, or rank – another participant's claim, opinion, or person.

On all three forums, participants talked about childcare issues respectfully and civilly. As Table 1 indicates, acts of degrading were rare, accounting for less than 2% of posts in all three cases. As we might expect, when uncivil behavior did occur, it was typically directed at participants with opposing political views. It is worth noting that such behavior led recipients to provide more reasoning and external evidence to support their claims, thus increasing the level of rationality and extended debate.

### Social-civic communicative practices

Mass complaining online often functions as an indirect force for political change in the internet era. As Table 2 shows, on *Qiangguo Luntan*, complaining represented 26.3% of posts. Childcare issues raised by participants were mostly framed as public policy issues in this explicitly political space as opposed to being defined as common concerns of the private sphere. The grievances expressed concerned issues such as children protection policies, unequal educational opportunities, grandparents and childcare concerning migrant

**Table 2.** Other Social-Civic Communicative Practices (%).

Civic behavior	Qiangguo Luntan (N = 616)	Tieba (N = 1128)	Yaolan (N = 691)
Complaining	26.3	18.3	14.2
Questioning	5.8	0.7	1.2
Advice-giving/helping	0.5	12.8	23.2
Storytelling	4.1	27.0	25.8
Social talk	1.6	5.4	7.4

Note: We used chi-square tests to identify differences across the three forums. Only the results of the frequently practiced communicative forms are listed: For complaining,  $\chi^2(2, N = 2435) = 31.94, p < .001$ ; For advice-giving/helping, fisher's exact test,  $p < .001$ ; For storytelling,  $\chi^2(2, N = 2435) = 141.46, p < .001$ .

workers in rural China, divorce policies, and so on. These issue-specific complaints usually targeted relevant authorities, often turning into hardened resistance against the state's current child welfare policies and, on occasions, even turning into cynical criticism of the political system. However, the tone of complaining was sometimes softened by humorous expressions or citizens' ironical use of nationalistic discourses. In the example below, a participant commented on a thread revealing the poverty problems in remote villages in China, stating: 'Nonsense. How should you have denied the great achievement of the reform and opening-up policy! Things like this only happen in Africa.' To critique the party-state, its nationalist discourse was held against it. In another thread about school bullying, a participant confronted the party-state in a joking tone with the lack of anti-bully policies at schools: 'Oh my Party (CCP), my dear Mom (CCP), how to protect your underage children from violence?'

*Qiangguo Luntan* thus acts as a barometer of public concern. By allowing the online expression of public grievances, the government can gauge citizens' concerns about childcare policies, accommodate these complaints into their policy-making, improve governance, and win legitimacy. In this way, social conflicts around specific child welfare issues are resolved, and, at the same time, the dichotomous relationship between the state and citizens is diluted. Making forceful complaints to policy-makers and communicating discontent to pressure the state into offering more support to families and children with social services, education, and safety protection shows how *Qiangguo Luntan* users deal with authorities and solve problems they are confronted with. Complaining is considered more than a civic behavior and part of a broader political process. If individual complaints about child welfare are not dealt with effectively by authorities, discontent may resurface, leading to continued grievances and generating further contention. Thus, sustained tensions may be resolved by authorities or can lead to gradual changes over time. In this sense, civic complaining online is an important way for ordinary Chinese citizens to get involved in the political process and practice their civic agency.

On *Tieba* and *Yaolan*, fewer posts involved complaining, representing 18.3% and 14.2% of their posts respectively. Complaints about childcare issues were mainly discussed as private concerns as opposed to public policy-related issues. Both *Tieba* and *Yaolan* participants tended to raise issue-specific complaints based on their personal experiences and self-interest, such as how to protect their child from child trafficking, looking for 'good' school districts, domestic violence, and stories told by migrant parents regarding leaving their children behind in rural villages. Moreover, unlike *Qiangguo Luntan* participants, whose complaints were primarily directed at (state) authorities, *Tieba* and *Yaolan* participants took their everyday troubles to other ordinary citizens for support, help, and advice. However, these issue-specific complaints seemed to escalate (throughout the two forums) into strong critique targeting, for example, corruption in the educational system, unequal distribution of school resources, the lack of welfare support for migrant workers, and, on occasion, hardened resistance against the political system more broadly.

Although many participants engaged in the civic behavior of complaining on the three forums, *Tieba* and *Yaolan* participants did not engage in direct complaints against state policies as much as *Qiangguo Luntan* participants did. However, they were more involved in other social-civic communicative practices, which emerged during everyday political talk. *Advice-giving* and *helping* others was much more common among *Tieba* and *Yaolan* participants. As Table 2 shows, this category represented 23.2% and 12.8% of *Yaolan* and *Tieba*'s posts. It was fairly common for participants here to turn to fellow users for advice or help when they encountered personal childcare problems. They often shared their personal experiences which pushed personal issues to the public arena, turning them into public issues. That is, as similar experiences accumulated in these threads, participants talked less about personal problems and more about public concerns. Participants worked together to help solve these problems collaboratively and collectively, which seemed to foster civic agency.

This process is illustrated in the following example. In one thread, a *Tieba* participant (a migrant mother) was expressing her sorrow for leaving her two children behind in her rural hometown. Another participant, then, responded by sharing

her own experience of growing up without parents and advised the migrant mother to try her best to live with her children to protect them from suffering psychological harm such distance may cause. A third participant asked the migrant mother about the reasons why she could not take her children to the city (Guangzhou). She replied that there were no childcare services (education and entertainment) available for her children and that she could not take good care of them due to long working hours at the factory. This provoked more posts, where participants shared similar dilemmas that migrant parents face in China today, thus engaging with structural socio-political issues, and tried to figure out the best they could do for their children.

*Storytelling* is a natural form of everyday talk by which people reflect upon their experiences, express values, and consider doing something. As Table 2 indicates, storytelling was the most prominent social-civic communicative practice on *Tieba* and *Yaolan*, representing 27.0% and 25.8% of their posts respectively. *Tieba* and *Yaolan* participants engaged in storytelling much more frequently than *Qiangguo Luntan* participants. As alluded to above, participants shared their stories about, for example, finding suitable schools for children, domestic violence, and issues around childcare and migrant workers. It allowed citizens to define their lived realities and directly speak for their personal concerns related to socio-political issues. Storytelling too was a reciprocal affair; participants would share, compare, and discuss their stories with one another. Such interpersonal communication encouraged citizens to actively articulate their personal experiences. This, along with the atmosphere of support, seemed to help foster mutual understanding among participants and the formation of group consciousness. The expressions of sympathy, good wishes, and social support more broadly – other common reactions storytelling tended to elicit – created a friendly and social atmosphere that fostered the exchange of ideas.

Sometimes sharing stories about childcare issues turned into *social talk* (or intimate conversations); i.e., talk that has no explicit political meaning, such as chitchat, banter, and greetings. Although such conversations lack the ‘political’ in political talk, they did facilitate social bonding among participants, strengthening their sense of belonging to the online

communities. Furthermore, these online social interactions can foster new social networks, bringing people closer together, potentially developing citizens’ social empowerment and civic engagement. For instance, in a thread focusing on domestic violence on *Yaolan*, a participant introduced a Tencent QQ (another popular social media in China) group chat account for sharing stories and supporting each other. This new social network provided participants with another entry into a variety of activities, including helping, supporting, and other civic activities linked to social associations or institutions.

## Discussion

This study shows that political talk about mundane issues that emerge across Chinese online forums opens up spaces for citizens to engage in politics. Discussing issues that relate to people’s everyday lives such as childcare and parenting are not considered controversial by the state upfront. This creates opportunities for political talk to emerge, especially in online forums that are not political per se. We have shown that the distinctive goals and characteristics of the three online forums indeed impacted the nature of political talk and opened up different types of spaces for ordinary citizens to negotiate child welfare issues with state agencies. Compared to the authoritarian discursive space with constrained freedom of speech on the party-state forum, the commercial-lifestyle and the commercial-topical forums created more open and inclusive spaces for citizens to engage in child welfare politics. In the Chinese social-cultural context, especially communicative forms that are traditionally not considered central to deliberative reasoning, such as complaining, sharing experiences through storytelling, and giving advice, open up and characterize such everyday public spaces where the boundaries of the private and the public are contested. The empirical findings provide new perspectives for understanding the nature of online political talk, thus contributing a non-Western lens for viewing and grasping the characteristics of the online public sphere.

On *Qiangguo Luntan*, posters rarely raised childcare issues related to their private lives. These were directly discussed as political issues. Although making claims (expressing an opinion) was the

dominant communicative form, the level of rationality and reciprocity, two key elements of deliberation, was noticeably low when compared to government-sponsored forums in Western countries (see, e.g., Jensen, 2003; Graham and Witschge, 2003). Nevertheless, complaining emerged as an important communicative form during everyday political talk. It was often employed by citizens as a method for shaping public discourse and pressuring state agencies to change aspects of child welfare policy. Although *Qiangguo Luntan* participants were allowed to critically engage with childcare policies, they were limited to the policies and issues set-out by the government. After the policy decisions are made by the government, participants were only provided with room to discuss how to best implement those policies. Thus, the party-state forum mainly functioned as a restrained ‘feedback mechanism’ to the state. The consultation process embodies the democratic centralism of the party-state.

On *Tieba* and *Yaolan*, our commercial-lifestyle and commercial-topical forums, participants enjoyed more freedom to raise their private concerns about childcare issues. The findings show that everyday talk on the nonpolitical online spaces facilitate Chinese citizens in transforming personal concerns into political acts, similar to what scholars found in everyday online spaces in Western countries (Graham, Jackson, & Wright, 2015, 2016). Regarding the deliberativeness of political talk, it was *Tieba* (the commercial-lifestyle forum), and not the explicitly political forum nor the seemingly nonpolitical topical forum, where deliberative practices were overall most common. Unlike *Qiangguo Luntan* and *Yaolan* participants, *Tieba* participants, on occasions, engaged in extended debate on topics concerning access to quality schools, though convergence of opinions remained extremely rare. But, overall, rational exchanges of different opinions are not frequent on all three forums, in line with what Medaglia and Yang (2017) found regarding public discussions on another Chinese forum.

Social-civic communicative practices such as storytelling and advice-giving were important means for citizens to express themselves on *Yaolan* and *Tieba*. *Yaolan* is a topical forum aimed at helping and supporting families regarding childcare and parenting issues. This explains why

storytelling and advice-giving were more prevalent than deliberative communicative practices. These personal forms of communication strengthened a sense of community and solidarity, encouraging the learning and internalizing of civic values rooted in everyday life. As citizens were socialized into the political process via these social-civic communicative practices, they became ‘active agents in their own socialization’ (Amnå, Ekström, Kerr, & Stattin, 2009, p. 27) rather than remaining passive. With both deliberative and civic practices emerging, a vibrant civic space integrated with the informal characteristics of everyday life came into being on *Tieba*. On *Yaolan* forum, a close community has emerged in which citizens shared personal experiences and were enabled to pursue a public experience of the self. Thus, these online spaces facilitate civic engagement and create online ‘third spaces’ (Wright, 2012) where citizens’ patterns of participation capture the informal nature of everyday life.

Unlike online third spaces in Western countries where political deliberations often emerge from casual everyday talk in nonpolitical settings (Graham, 2010, 2012; Graham, Jackson, & Wright, 2015), reason, rule-based deliberation was not the dominant communicative practice in these Chinese online third spaces. Instead, political (narrative) acts of complaining and sharing personal concerns grounded in citizens’ lived experiences were the norm, allowing people to find their own ways to raise and discuss matters of common concern, (indirectly) countering the state’s policies. We argue that political talk in such third spaces represents an inclusive model of public discourse, which links social issues with the lifeworld and widens the scope of what counts as the ‘political’; and thus, in turn, a grounded model of deliberation that gives more normative importance to political (narrative) acts of complaining and sharing personal concerns is needed to understand how a public sphere might emerge and operate on the Chinese internet.

## Conclusion

We conclude that the incorporation of local social-civic norms via communicative forms that are not traditionally considered central to deliberative reasoning is vital for understanding the emergence and actualization of an active online public sphere

in the context of China. By applying the social-civic values and norms rooted in Chinese *minjian* society, citizens' mundane social-civic communicative practices constitute the core characteristics of a looming online public sphere. Meanwhile, the social-civic values play a major role in bounding participants together and fostering 'civic affinity' that could blur into civic trust (Dahlgren, 2002), which according to democratic theories are inherent for a well-functioning online public sphere. Our analysis shows the communitarian norms of sharing, helping, and supporting developed in the Chinese *minjian* tradition of surviving life difficulties through support networks, work as the social-cultural prerequisite of civic engagement. They do not fit into the Western culture of citizenship rooted in liberal traditions, which encourage individuals to stand up for their own interests and confront public authorities. Participants' communicative capacity was shaped by the paternalistic relationship between the state and its people maintained in Chinese *minjian* society. Under the patriarchal power structures, individuals are to a certain extent allowed to express discontents against the power hierarchies in public administration, while not opposing the government nor the state. In our study, participants frequently employ latent discontent expressions via the social-civic forms of communication in everyday online spaces, without directly confronting the government. Based on the empirical findings, we argue that the Chinese online public sphere is patriarchal in nature, which maintains and reproduces the paternalistic power structure existing in Chinese society by both enabling and limiting counter-discourses.

Overall, by moving beyond 'political' forums, this study has revealed different features and qualities of China's online public sphere. The aims and characteristics of different forums open up distinctive communicative third spaces for Chinese citizens to talk about everyday life politics, depending on which forum they go to. Therefore, to better understand the nature of political talk in the emerging Chinese public sphere, more research is needed which investigates the vast array of Chinese online communities that open up third spaces, especially the ones that have arisen around lifestyle issues. Research is starting to emerge in this area, for example, Wu's (2017) work on Chinese

online popular culture communities around reality television has offered valuable insight into entertainment's role in fostering civic engagement. More research too is needed on the different ways Chinese netizens talk politics and negotiate the boundaries between the private and the public sphere. As our study has found the social-civic communicative forms of complaining and storytelling were more prominent than deliberative forms. We need research to help us better understand the different ways (depending on different contexts) Chinese netizens talk politics and rethink the application of the conventional notion of deliberation in understanding online public sphere from and within a Chinese perspective. Research too needs to move beyond Web 1.0 platforms such as discussion forums (BBS) and start investigating political talk across (and between) the various public and private social media platforms in China (such as WeChat) in order to further explore how public deliberation emerges in the context of everyday life in China. Methodologically, our research encountered limitations because of missing data. Due to censorship and/or moderation rules of the forums, some thread URLs had become unretrievable when we went back to check and analyze previously collected postings. This is a complicated problem beyond our control. If possible, it would be interesting to study such data in future research to get a glimpse of how sensitive political talk emerges in citizens' everyday conversations.

## Note

1. For more detail on the coding scheme, see Sun et al., (2020)

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## Appendix 1. Keyword List for Political Talk about Childcare and Parenting

Keywords	English translation
出生证明/准生证/二胎	Birth certificate/birth permission/second child
奶粉/食品安全/儿童公共卫生安全	Milk powder/food safety/children health
拐骗儿童/防拐教育	Children trafficking/anti-trafficking efforts
儿童安全/自我保护/保护儿童	Children safety/self-protection education for children/children protection
单亲家庭	Single-parent family
幼儿园/幼儿园入学/小学/小学入学/学区房	Kindergarten/enrolling and starting kindergarten/enrolling and starting Primary school/buying houses in good school districts
留守儿童	Left-behind children in Rural China
户口/上户口/新生儿上户口/社会抚养费	Household registration for new-born babies/social maintenance fees
虐童	Child abuse
家庭暴力	Domestic violence