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Authoritarian Resilience 2.0: The Chinese Party-State's Adaptive Internet Strategies

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AUTHORITARIAN RESILIENCE 2.0:
THE CHINESE PARTY-STATE'S ADAPTIVE
INTERNET STRATEGIES

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Abstract

The Chinese party-state's ability to rehabilitate its legitimacy has been puzzling some scholars. While the authoritarian resilience discourse was initially used to explain why the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) survived the 1990s' political turmoil, is it still valid today? The central research question of this thesis is: What is the role of the Internet in relation to authoritarian resilience in China? I will examine how the Chinese party-state utilises the Internet to help it stay in power. The party-state's approach to the Internet is not monolithic.

I have identified five Internet strategies employed by the authorities: i) Internet commentators; ii) e-government; iii) government Weibo; iv) online message boards; and v) state-sponsored search engines. My research found that official Internet commentators are mostly government employees or party officials. In regards to rewards, Internet commentators do not necessarily receive 50 Chinese cents as rewards. e-government functions provided by provincial government portals in 2014 were much more comprehensive and sophisticated than a decade ago. Case studies on government Weibo demonstrated that the party-state goes beyond propaganda by using Weibo as a tool for engaging and interacting with netizens, as well as providing some e-services. Government online message boards dedicated to the interaction between netizens and senior officials. They could serve as a feedback mechanism. China Search as the only state-sponsored search engine, it feeds users with government approved information via search results, and attempts to cultivate a favourable Internet environment for the CCP.

These five strategies show that the Chinese party-state's approach towards the Internet is not only about censorship and propaganda but also make use of this technology. In terms of the theoretical implications, this thesis broadens and deepens the debate, and provides a new perspective in the understanding of resilient authoritarianism, which I called 'authoritarian resilience 2.0'

Preface

Before attending an interview for a lectureship position at a university in England last summer, I was chatting with another candidate, an English gentleman working as a freelance journalist for several British newspapers. Shocked to hear that my PhD research is about China's Internet policy, he asked, 'is there Internet in China?'

In July this year, I was giving a guest lecture on China's innovative Internet propaganda strategies at the Media Policy Summer Institute co-organised by the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Oxford. Many participants, including media lawyers, researchers, PhD students, and journalists from across the world, were surprised to learn that the Chinese government uses social media to engage the public. All they knew about China's Internet was the practice of censorship, and the existence of the Great Firewall.

Having covered Chinese politics as a journalist for over a decade, and researched this topic for my PhD thesis, I was surprised to see how little the general public knows about China's Internet politics. Perhaps I take it for granted that everyone should know as much about China as I do. Aiming to show the world the other side of the party-state's approach towards the Internet, I was inspired to pursue this research topic.

I embarked on my research journey in 2011, when Xi Jinping was preparing to take over from Hu Jintao as the fifth-generation leader of China. Many of the cases I examined occurred under Hu's leadership, when media control was relatively relaxed compared to the present day. When Xi took office in 2012, there were high hopes that he would foster a freer society. To many people's disappointment, the party-state under Xi is tightening up control in every aspect, especially on the Internet. From its crackdown on Weibo celebrities (the so called Big V), to arresting netizens for spreading 'inappropriate messages' on social media, and from upgrading the Great Firewall to banning VPN developers – these repressive measures have been intensified in the run up to the 19th CCP National Congress in October 2017.

On the surface, my research appears to portray the Chinese authorities positively. In fact, it helps to offer a full picture of the party-state's 'carrot and stick' approach to the Internet. While most people know about the 'stick', I focus on the 'carrot'. This carrot and stick approach sometimes yields contradictory interpretations. The 2017 World Press Freedom Index labels China as the world's fifth-worst country for press freedom. Meanwhile, according to the United Nations E-Government Survey, China ranked 22nd in the world in terms of e-participation, better than many OECD countries.

Regardless of where the party-state under Xi's second term is heading in the next five years, the findings of my research serve as a snapshot of history, which records the Chinese authorities' adaptive Internet strategies in the early 21st century.

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Abbreviations

CASS	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CNNIC	China Internet Network Information Centre
CPPCC	Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
DOP	Department of Propaganda
GWTV	The Great Wall TV Platform
MIIT	Ministry of Information Industry
NPC	National People's Congress
NGOs	Non-governmental Organisations
PRC	People's Republic of China
SARFT	State Administration for Radio, Film and Television
SARFT	State Administration for Radio, Film and Television
SCIO	State Council Information Office

1. Chapter One: Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) plans to hold its 19th National Congress in October 2017, at which Xi Jinping is expected to be re-elected as General Secretary, thus beginning his second five-year term. Since his succession as the fifth generation Chinese leader in 2012, Xi has been relentlessly consolidating his personal power, as well as the CCP's. As a result, Xi and the CCP seem to be firmly in control of the Chinese state. Less than three decades ago, after the Tiananmen Massacre on 4 June 1989, the Chinese party-state suffered from sanctions and isolation from the West. It was also in 1989 that Communist regimes in the Eastern Bloc began to collapse one after another. Finally, the dissolution of the USSR in December 1991 saw the end of Communism in Europe. Uncomfortably, China found itself the largest Communist regime still standing, and was looking at waves of democratisations in the former Communist countries in Eastern Europe. Faced with a serious legitimacy crisis, some of the Western observers were predicting the collapse of the CCP. And yet, since then China has seen two peaceful leadership successions, from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao and then to Xi. As of 2017, the Chinese party-state survives. How did it manage this?¹

What puzzled scholarship most in the past was the party-state's ability to rehabilitate its legitimacy, in other words, the public's belief that the regime is lawful and should be obeyed (Nathan 2003). One of the prominent explanations is the theory of authoritarian resilience, according to which the CCP is able to enhance the capacity of the state to govern effectively through institutional adaptations and policy adjustments (Dickson 2005). While the authoritarian resilience discourse was initially used to explain why the CCP survived the 1990s' political turmoil, the Chinese authority faces new challenges in the 21st century. The Arab Spring has brought down a few authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa; the rapid development of the Internet makes it more difficult for the Chinese authorities to fully control the flow of information; the question of the CCP's legitimacy has been brought up again. In this context, is the authoritarian resilience theory still relevant today? Is authoritarian resilience in China a passing phenomenon or a permanent feature? Can the CCP's resilient authoritarian system successfully resist or prevent democratic demand?

¹In my thesis, I use the terms party-state, the CCP, and government interchangeably. This is because the division between the party and the state is often blurred. For example, the State Council Information Office is also the External Propaganda Office of the CCP Central Committee. The CCP Central Commission for Discipline Inspection and the Ministry of Supervision share the same website. The Message Board for Local Leaders is dedicated to both party secretaries and representatives of the government such as governors and mayors.

The main research question of this thesis is: what is the role of the Internet in relation to authoritarian resilience in China? In other words, how the Chinese party-state utilises the Internet to help it stay in power. Some critical voices suggest that in order to regain the public's confidence and prevent a bottom-up revolution, the party-state should abandon the notion of authoritarian resilience and embrace a systematic democratic transition (Li 2012). This thesis suggests that resilient authoritarianism has not ended in China, but instead, that its political system indeed remains flexible. Current literature on authoritarian resilience does not take into account the influence of the Internet on the state's strategic considerations. While traditional media is considered as one of the factors in stabilising authoritarian regimes in the authoritarian resilience discourse, I argue that the CCP's adapt and change strategies towards the Internet specifically contribute to the survival of the Communist regime. In other words, I will aim to demonstrate that in order to mobilise public support and enhance legitimacy, the CCP is willing to introduce innovative propaganda strategies on the Internet in accordance with the changing media environment in the age of the Internet.

The Internet landscape in China is diverse. In a quasi-mirror of the reality on the ground, the Chinese party-state's approach to the Internet is not monolithic, but is sometimes contradictory. At a symposium on cyber security and informatisation held in April 2016, Chinese President Xi stressed the role of the Internet in directing and representing public opinion. He urged officials to use the Internet more often to learn what concerns people have in order to dissolve public discontent and address grievances. Xi went further to encourage criticism of the party and of the state: 'we will not only welcome it, but also carefully study it for future reference.'² The CCP never gave up its control of the media, especially under Xi Jinping's leadership, who has tightened its grip on the press in recent years. On his latest visit to the top state media headquarters, Xi demanded 'absolute loyalty' from journalists, emphasising that '(you) must love the party, protect the party, and closely align yourselves with the party leadership in thought, politics, and action.'³

The CCP cannot merely rely on traditional media to represent its stance and disseminate messages, but most recently has had to introduce adaptive and innovative methods to directly engage with the public via the Internet. With over 731 million Internet users at the end of 2016,⁴ China has the largest Internet

²Xinhua News. 2016. 'China's Xi calls for better development of Internet,' 19 April. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-04/19/c_135294307.htm (accessed 20 April 2016)

³*The Guardian*. 2016. 'Xi Jinping asks for 'absolute loyalty' from Chinese state media', 19 February.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/19/xi-jinping-tours-chinas-top-state-media-outlets-to-boost-loyalty> (accessed 19 February 2016).

⁴ China Internet Network Information Center. 2017. 'Di 39ci zhongguo hulian wangluo fazhan zhuangkang tongji baogao (The 39th Survey Report on China's Internet Development)', 22 January.

population in the world. The Internet's potential as a force in public relations and politics is unmatched, however given its nature—driven by speed and two-way communications—it is difficult to control. In an impressive effort and in spite of numerous challenges, the party-state has been able to adapt and change in accordance with the development of Internet technologies. On the one hand, the CCP imposes censorship and filters information in the cyberspace, while on the other hand, as I argue in this thesis, it uses the Internet for propaganda purposes and beyond. A new and innovative system of e-governance emerges in the process. China's propaganda strategy has been shifting from indoctrination to public opinion guidance, which relies on persuasion instead of force.

Nathan (2003: 6–7) acknowledges that the establishment of institutions for political participation strengthens the CCP's legitimacy among the public at large. One of the political institutions to provide a bridge between state and society is the government offices for petition letters and complaint visits (*xinfang*) (Nathan 2003 and Dickson 2005). To what extent the *xinfang* system is effective remains questionable. In addition to the main argument concerning authoritarian resilience, this thesis suggests that the Internet offers new potential for public participation. Rather than considering the Internet as merely another medium whose main function is to serve as a propaganda tool, the government has started to see its potential for achieving greater purposes. One of the most significant Internet initiatives is *wangluo wenzheng*—which consists of the idea of e-participation, e-consultation, and e-scrutiny—that emerged during Hu Jintao's presidency. In other words, *wangluo wenzheng* is the Chinese government's effort to promote e-governance. Chinese officials have been urged to use Internet platforms including Wechat, Weibo, online message boards, and government portals to interact with the public, provide e-services, and collect public opinions. By doing so, it hopes to rally public support and enhance legitimacy.

The promotion of e-governance (*wangluo wenzheng*) offers a new opportunity to bridge the gap between state and society, subsequently fostering a closer relationship between them. Prior to the Internet age, the general public had very few channels to contact the state or individual officials directly. While users benefit from the new technology, the Chinese party-state's treatment of the Internet has shifted towards a view of it as mechanism which can be employed for purposes that go beyond propaganda. The government is ready to use it in a constructive way that improves the interaction between leaders and their people. Moreover, the idea of transforming China into an Internet power

<https://cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201706/P020170608523740585924.pdf> (accessed 29 June 2017).

(*wangluo qiangguo*), advocated by Xi Jinping, further suggests that the party-state sees the potential of the Internet to be used towards greater aims such as safeguarding China's version of cyber sovereignty.

The early literature on Internet propaganda in China mainly focuses on censorship and the control of information. However, this is only one side of the coin. My thesis not only fills a gap in scholarship, but also provides a fresh angle by demonstrating that the CCP's Internet strategy has moved beyond censorship, and even beyond the traditional sense of propaganda, towards e-governance.⁵ This thesis suggests that the CCP's strategies on the Internet keep evolving, from indoctrination to public opinion guidance, from censorship to e-governance, from an emphasis on the promotion of e-government to building an Internet power. All these demonstrate the regime's capability to adapt and change, the essence of authoritarian resilience.

Critics of resilient authoritarianism scholarship point to the theory's monolithic conceptualizing of China and fail to acknowledge the paradoxical transformative trends in China (Li 2012). The Internet is regarded as being able to subvert state control over the flow of information (Ferdinand, 2000). Stockmann and Gallagher (2011) observe that the party-state's resilience may be the result of the increased sensationalism and sophistication of press coverage in China, and is not opposed to it. Official lines are more effectively conveyed and absorbed when presented in an innovative way rather than as the old-style propaganda of a Leninist state. I argue that the CCP's approach towards the Internet is not only concerned with censorship and propaganda, but is also capable of adaptation and of making use of this technology in an innovative way to control the information flow. In other words, the party-state's approach is not monolithic, but rather a sophisticated one.

Assessing the limits of authoritarian resilience, Gilley (2003) identify three features that are most difficult to institutionalize, namely, elite promotions; the maintenance of elite functional responsibility; and popular participation. Pei (2012) points out another variable associated with authoritarian resilience—the capacity to adapt to new social and political challenges. In other words, whether the regime can adopt new policies that contribute to its longevity and power.

How does the state respond to the development of a new information and communications technology?

How does it turn the Internet to its advantage when managing online public opinion? How does it adopt

⁵Since I began my research six years ago, there has been an increasing number of papers looking at China's Internet from different approaches, which I will discuss in the literature review section.

innovative Internet strategies to move beyond propaganda in its online activities? How do these strategies interact and intersect with netizens?⁶ For an umbrella perspective, I identified five major innovative online strategies employed by the party-state: i) deploying Internet commentators; ii) setting up government Weibo accounts; iii) promoting e-government; iv) introducing government online message boards; and v) launching state-sponsored search engines. These five strategies form the core of the five empirical chapters of this thesis.

I will demonstrate, through the five empirical chapters, the complexity of the Chinese government's Internet strategies. Among the five strategies listed above, Weibo, online message boards, and e-government fall under the category of e-governance initiatives. They all serve as new platforms for the public to interact with the state, acting as a form of popular participation. Through these channels, netizens can express their opinions, make suggestions, file their complaints, or expose government wrongdoing. Meanwhile, the state provide e-services, direct public opinion, and feed pro-government information via these platforms, in an effort that goes beyond propaganda. However, one must bear in mind that whatever one sees on Chinese Internet is known by the party-state. The state is ultimately the authority deciding what can be allowed on the Internet. Comments deemed too critical, sensitive or which may lead to collective action are banned (King et al 2017, Sullivan 2014, and Yang 2014). In addition to 'sticks,' how the CCP uses 'carrots'—in the form of Weibo, online message boards, and e-government—to help it stay in power should also be acknowledged.

By comparison, Internet commentators and state-sponsored search engines are measures not designed for encouraging public participations, but they are innovative ways to control the information flow and direct public opinion. The conventional method of handling undesirable information posted on social media and on online forums is to delete it, which the authorities have been intensifying in the past few years. In addition to this, the party-state also deploy Internet commentators to sway public opinion by publishing pro-government comments. As for search engines, the CCP not only imposes strict censorship on commercial search engines, but also launched its own engine in order to ensure that only government-approved information appears in search results. Both measures – Internet commentators and search engines – are representations of propaganda work that is proactive and innovative relative

⁶ According to the Cambridge Dictionary, 'netizen' means 'a person who uses the internet'. See: <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/netizen>. Mainland China-based English language media refer all internet users (*wangyou* or *wangmin*) as 'netizen'. For more discussion see Brian Fung, "'Netizen': Why Is This Goofy-Sounding Word So Important in China?", *The Atlantic*, 11 October 2012 and Matt Schiavenza, "Enough with the word 'Netizen'", *The Atlantic*, 25 September 2013

to conventional censorship, beyond which they move in complexity. All in all, the five strategies identified indicate the party-state's willingness and capability to adapt and change in the face of a new media environment.

In terms of the theoretical implications, this thesis broadens and deepens the debate, and provides a new perspective in the understanding of resilient authoritarianism, which I call 'authoritarian resilience 2.0'. Scholars have debated whether totalitarian regimes can adapt to modernity (Nathan 2003). In recent years, the party-states's rule has been seen as stagnant, and its hold on power is considered increasingly tenuous (Li 2011 and Li 2013). In 2013, Nathan acknowledged that the resilience of the authoritarian regime in China was approaching its limits.⁷ Shambaugh (2015) predicted that the endgame of communist rule in China has begun, and Xi's ruthless measures are only 'bringing the country closer to a breaking point'. There have been discussions in public fora on whether the CCP is on the brink of collapse, and some observers even proclaimed the inevitability of the fall of the CCP and the transition to democracy.⁸ With Xi starting his second five-year term as the party's General Secretary in October 2017, the question of the durability of the rule of the party is not only theoretically important, but also politically relevant. Can the party-state survive in the Internet age? By examining how the Chinese party-state makes good use of Internet technologies, this thesis suggests that the CCP can adapt to modernity. In the era of 'authoritarian resilience 2.0', this adapt and change capability is best found in the regime's Internet strategies.

As regards originality and my contribution to scholarship, there are five aspects which I would like to emphasise: Firstly, chapter two demonstrates that the party-state's Internet strategies evolve along with the development of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), a fact overlooked by many scholars. That might be one of the reasons why a high proportion of the literature focuses on censorship but fails to grasp the implications of the other side of the coin, which is more complex and progressive than propaganda. Secondly, it is widely cited that Internet commentators receive 50 Chinese cents for each pro-government post, however none of the literature provides concrete evidence to prove it.⁹ My study, based on official documents collected from government sources, suggests that this is not

⁷Banyan, 2013, 'The old regime and the revolution', *The Economist*, March 16.

<https://www.economist.com/news/china/21573546-why-some-think-china-approaching-political-tipping-point-old-regime-and-revolution> (accessed 18 May 2017)

⁸For more detailed discussion, see *Foreign Policy*, 'When Will China's Government Collapse? A look at whether or not the Chinese Communist Party is doomed', March 13, 2015

http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/13/china_communist_party_collapse_downfall/ (accessed 10 June 2017)

⁹Please see Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion.

reflective of reality. Government Internet commentators do not necessarily receive extra rewards for their work, with important implications for the significance of their support of the government. Monetary rewards are not the only incentive. Thirdly, the use of government online message boards as a tool for e-governance has yet to be studied systematically. Current Chinese language literature only covers the Message Board for Local Leaders, while four other state-led boards are overlooked.¹⁰ To the best of my knowledge, a comparative study of all government online message boards has not been conducted in the past, with mine as the first approach. Fourthly, my thesis is the first comprehensive study of the development of state-sponsored search engines, including an empirical study of the latest search engine, China Search. Fifthly, although there have been studies of the use of Internet commentators, Weibo, e-government, and search engines respectively, I examine them from multiple perspectives in order to form a comprehensive picture of China's Internet policy.

In summary, my thesis aims to provide a new dimension in understanding China's sophisticated and adaptive Internet strategies. By examining how the CCP introduces the five Internet strategies in response to the changing media environment, I hope to achieve the following goals: a) bring the research on China's resilient authoritarianism up to date by applying the theory to the Internet age; b) demonstrate the party-state's resilience; c) show that the authoritarian resilience theory is valid in understanding China's politics under Xi.

My thesis consists of eight chapters: an introduction, the changing concept of propaganda policies, five empirical chapters, and a conclusion. Chapter one serves as an introduction including literature review of authoritarian resilience and legitimacy, and methodology. Chapter two includes literature on propaganda and an account of the evolution of propaganda strategies in China. Chapter three examines how the Chinese party-state employs Internet commentators to sway online public opinion. Chapter four studies the e-government function and demonstrates how the central government website and 31 provincial portals provide e-services. Chapter five looks at how the party, government departments, and individual officials use Weibo as a platform to interact with netizens. Chapter six illustrates how officials engage with the public via government online message boards. Chapter seven examines how state-sponsored search engines act as a new tool to feed government-approved information to netizens. Chapter eight concludes that the Chinese party-state's strategies of handling the Internet have moved beyond censorship and propaganda, towards a more innovative way of promoting better governance.

¹⁰Please see Chapter 6 for a detailed discussion.

1.1. Authoritarian Resilience in the Internet age

As mentioned earlier, Western scholarship on the CCP's resilient authoritarianism began to emerge in the mid-1990s. When the CCP survived the political turmoil in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Massacre and the fall of the Soviet bloc, many China observers attributed the feat to the state's endurance and adaptability. The Chinese party-state seems to be able to enhance the capacity to govern effectively through institutional adaptations and policy adjustments. Although the authoritarian resilience discourse was initially used to explain why the CCP survived the 1990s, this approach remains an area of interest among scholars in the 21st century.

The CCP has been able to enhance the state capacity to govern effectively via institutional adaptations and policy adjustments. This 'adapt and change' character can also be found in its Internet strategies, not only for old fashion propaganda but also as a more innovative approach. Although media is considered as one of the factors in stabilizing authoritarian regimes in the authoritarian resilience discourse, how the CCP adopts different Internet strategies to its advantage has not been fully studied.

There is a large amount of literature studying the effects of media on the ruling of authoritarian regimes (e.g. Fukuyama 1992; Jiang 2010; Johnson and Kolko 2010; Kalathil and Boas 2003; Kern and Hainmueller, 2009; Norris and Inglehart, 2009; Schatz 2009; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011; Stockmann 2013). Fukuyama (1992) suggests that soft authoritarianism relies more on the means of persuasion rather than of coercion, which means to frame political debate, define the political agenda and channel political outcomes. Authoritarian rulers may effectively manage information flows not by absolute control of the media but by seeking to maintain dominance in guiding the media to project images that strengthen its position (Schatz 2009). Many authoritarian regimes, China for example, are ambitiously advocating institutional and political changes to consolidate leaders' political power, and the media have played a critical role in this process (Stockmann and Gallagher 2011).

One-party regimes are the most common type of authoritarian rule. Of the 192 member states of the United Nations, half are authoritarian, and among them, over half are ruled by one party (Diamond 2002; Magaloni and Kricheli 2010). China belongs to the category of single-party authoritarian regime

(Stockmann 2013). Compared with other authoritarian regimes, one-party regimes tend to survive longer by applying two mechanisms—mobilizing the masses and facilitating the bargaining process with the elites (Magaloni and Kricheli 2010).

In relation to the longevity of the CCP, 'adapt and survive' has been considered a main factor (Dickson 1997, 2000; Kahn 2003; Nathan 2003; Shambaugh 2008). Furthermore, Nathan (2003) and Shambaugh (2008) attribute the CCP's durability to its ability of adaptation and change. Nathan believes that it is the institutionalization of the CCP that contributes to the party-state prevailing. He identifies four aspects of the CCP regime's institutionalization: 1) the increasingly norm-bound nature of its succession politics; 2) the increase in meritocracy as opposed to factional considerations in the promotion of political elites; 3) the differentiation and functional specialization of institutions within the regime; and 4) the establishment of institutions for political participation and appeal that strengthen the CCP's legitimacy among the public at large.

Nathan (2003: 15) observes that the Chinese government has developed a series of 'input institutions' - letters-and-visits departments (*xinfang ju*) - where citizens can file their complaints and grievances to the state. This mechanism, Nathan argues, allows the people to believe that they have a certain level of influence on the government's decision making, at least at the local level. With the rapid development of weibo as well as e-government, the function and significance of letters-and-visits departments has increasingly been replaced by weibo and online petitions (Rahul and Zhou 2011).¹¹ As more and more government apparatuses set up accounts on weibo, the masses have more channels to communicate directly with the officials in a more effective way. The other input institution that Nathan (2003: 15) believes may help create regime legitimacy at the mass level is the media, which increasingly acts as 'tribunes of the people, exposing complaints against wrong-doing by local-level officials'. While Nathan's observation was made more than ten years ago, when online media was still in infancy in China, it is still the case today. In fact, online message boards and Weibo, which are relatively free from the restrictions and censorship imposed on traditional news media, better serve as platforms for the public to express their opinions.

¹¹ Rahul Jacob and Zhou Ping. 2011. 'China's ancient petition system goes online,' The Financial Times. 30 September. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/5b2b5ce2-eb2b-11e0-9a41-00144feab49a.html#axzz2TrZwXRAF> (accessed 20 May 2013)

It was due to the ability of adaptation, Nathan argues, that the CCP has been able to survive without triggering regime change or a transition to democracy. The five Internet strategies examined in this thesis not only confirm Nathan's argument, but extend it to the Internet age.

In trying to answer the question of whether authoritarian resilience in China is a passing phenomenon or something more durable, Pei (2012) points out that current studies on the endurance of authoritarian regimes suffer from a number of weaknesses, such as being ad hoc based and inductive, and having a selection bias problem due to small sample sizes. Pei (2012: 33) suggests additional factors that help to explain the survival of 'resilient' authoritarian regimes. One of these additional factors is the 'tactical sophistication' of the party-state's efforts at manipulating public opinion, which is a mixture of strict censorship and campaigning for popular support. In response to new threats posed by information and communication technologies, the party-state employs 'relatively effective countermeasures,' which include both regulatory restrictions and technological measures (Pei 2012: 33). By adopting new tactics, Pei argues, the CCP's propaganda strategies have grown more sophisticated, therefore managing to limit the political impact of the information revolution and helping to guard the CCP's political hegemony. Pei, however, stops short of further elaborating how 'tactical sophistication' helps the regime maintain power. This thesis further examines how the Chinese authorities implement those sophisticated strategies by making good use of ICT.

Examining how the party-state pursues a policy of inclusion, by co-opting new elites and creating links with non-party organizations, Dickson (2000) argues that although both co-optation and corporatism have had positive impacts on China's economy and the CCP, neither is likely to lead to the transformation of the party-state's political system. While co-optation and the creation of organizational links seem essential in advancing economic modernization, Dickson (2000: 523) points out that they are not sufficient to guarantee the CCP's survival.

As the above literature indicated, current literature regarding authoritarian resilience in China has its limits. Nathan (2003) uses regime institutionalization to explain authoritarian resilience, whereas Gilley (2003) points out the limits of authoritarian resilience and suggests that the characterization of regime institutionalization is mistaken; Shambaugh (2008) argues that the CCP learned from the lessons of the Soviet bloc and adopted changes in order to survive; Pei (2012) looks at additional factors that contribute to regime survival, and points out that the party-state employs a mixture of strict censorship

and campaigning to manipulate public opinion; Dickson (2000) focuses on co-optation and corporatism in understanding the CCP's adaptability. This thesis shall fill these gaps by addressing what the role of the Internet is in relation to authoritarian resilience in China, and how the party-state manages to adopt innovative Internet strategies in accordance with the development of ICT and the changing media environment.

1.2. Legitimacy and the Chinese Communist Party

The authoritarian resilience literature on China tries to understand the CCP's apparent ability to rehabilitate its legitimacy in response to a serious legitimacy crisis in the post-Tiananmen period. Holbig and Gilley (2009) argues that in explaining the party-state's durability, legitimacy must be given a central place. For a long time, the word 'legitimacy' was taboo in China. Discussion on the issue was forbidden as Chinese officials were concerned that it would raise doubts among the public about the CCP's ruling position and lead to calls for democratic elections (Yu 2015). Nonetheless, the question of 'authoritarian durability' has returned to the political science debate in the 21st century. The quest for legitimacy was made explicit in 2004 when the CCP admitted that 'the party's governing status is not congenital, nor is it something settled once and for all'.¹² In 2015, Wang Qishan, head of the CCP's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), remarked that 'the legitimacy of the ruling party is derived from history and is the choice of the people' (Cao 2015). Wang further pointed out that whether the government performs good deeds or not is determined by the people's attitudes. Chinese state media called this the first time that China's top leaders have 'expounded on the legitimacy of the ruling party', an 'important breakthrough' in party discourse (Cao 2015).

Observers believe that Wang's remarks reflected a shift of attitude in the party-state as a result of intensified social conflicts and increasing pressure from an underperforming economy (Gan 2015). Although CCP leaders did not use the term 'legitimacy' before, the issue was never far from their minds. Holbig and Gilley (2010) argue that reclaiming legitimacy is at the centre of contemporary Chinese politics.

In fact, political legitimacy is one of the most important issues in political science. Lipset (quoted in McLean 1996: 281) argues that, 'legitimacy involves the capacity of the political system to engender and

¹² Quoted in Holbig and Gilley 2010.

maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society.' Gilley (2006) suggests that political legitimacy is a major determinant of both the structure and operation of states, which is related to how power may be used in ways that citizens consciously accept others. It is generally expected that democratic regimes enjoy higher legitimacy than authoritarian ones. In a representative democracy, people accept the legitimacy of a political authority because they have the right to participate in a contested election which results in a government that represents the majority of voters, hence, becoming members of the legitimate 'demos' in democracy (Rothstein 2007). Rothstein and Teorell (2008), however, argue that the legitimacy of the state depends on the quality of government instead of the quality of elections or representation. In other words, a government that was elected through democratic elections is not necessarily considered by its people as legitimate if it fails to deliver good governance.

Likewise, a state that enjoys high levels of legitimacy does not necessarily have to be democratically elected as long as its performance meets the expectation of the population. The definition of state legitimacy used by Gilley (2006: 500) is: 'a state is more legitimate the more that it is treated by its citizens as rightfully holding and exercising political power.' Nathan (2007) suggests citizens' perceptions of a regime's policy performance as one possible set of causes of high or low regime support, which assumes that the state gains legitimacy when it meets the expectation of the populations and loses it when it fails to do so.

Since the former Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping, launched economic reform in the 1980s, China's economy has undergone tremendous development that has led to the substantial improvement of people's living standard. By providing material benefits, the authorities hope to keep the citizens satisfied, thus preventing them from requesting political reform that may undermine the legitimacy of the regime. Economic growth alone, nonetheless, is not sufficient to maintain legitimacy; how government performance is perceived by the public also affects the accountability and popularity of the regime (Nathan 2007). To some extent, legitimacy can be considered as a power relationship between governing authorities and citizens. Enjoying a certain level of support or participation from the population is vital for the survival of a regime (Zhong 1996).

As Zhong (1996: 217) observes, 'legitimation and re-legitimation will be a permanent feature of Chinese politics as long as the Chinese Communist Party is in power.' Whereas providing good governance and

delivering services that the public demands can enhance state legitimacy, propaganda is considered by the CCP as an important tool to convince the people to accept its leadership, improve the state's image and mobilize grassroots' support. Zheng (2007) argues that information technology, the Internet in particular, is perceived as one of the core pillars of sustainable economic growth—the foundation of the CCP's political legitimacy. As a relatively new technology, it was not until recent years that the Internet has been incorporated into the CCP's propaganda mechanism and to a larger extent, used as a means to increase state capacity.

1.3. Methodology

The research methods I selected in support of my thesis were mainly qualitative, including content analysis of government portals, government Weibo accounts, and state-sponsored search engines. I also analysed official documents and archives. Most of the data I collected from official sources is primary data. I also made field trips to Guangzhou and Beijing in the summer of 2014 and conducted elite and other interviews. The following paragraphs contain brief accounts of the main methodologies. Additional detail on each can be found in the empirical chapters, with ties to the idiosyncrasies of specific online strategies employed by the Chinese government.

Content analysis is a systematic method to analyse communication content in a comprehensive way, one that is less prone to subjective selectiveness and idiosyncrasies (Hansen et al. 1998). Lasswell calls it a 'continuing survey of "world attention" – as reflected in trends in media coverage of various social issues – to show the elements involved in the formation of public opinion.' (Beniger 1978: 438) In agenda-setting studies, Dearing and Rogers (1998) attempt to examine how the media agenda comes to dominate and influence what the public regards as the most important issues through content analysis of media coverage and surveys of public opinion. In my thesis I collected data and used content analysis to examine how the CCP engage, interact, and influence netizens via government websites and Weibo accounts. Considering the accessibility, availability and credibility of research material, this thesis focuses on government websites (domain name ends with gov.cn), Weibo accounts set up by the party-state on Sina Weibo, and state media websites.

Documentary research involves an extensive examination of books, CCP and government documents, media reports, and academic publications. Due to the promotion of e-government by the party-state, increasing numbers of official documents and papers were made available on government websites (including central, ministerial, and provincial level), which provide unprecedented access to official information.

To study the use of Internet commentators, I collected official documents, policy papers, and announcements from government websites by searching the keywords “Internet commentator” (*wangluo pinglun yuan*) on the two main search engines, Baidu and Google. In order to ensure the authenticity and authoritativeness of the documents, I only accessed official website domains ending with ‘.gov.cn.’ A total of 98 government documents were collected from various departments, ranging from provincial level to county level, from Police Departments to the Bureau for Letters and Calls. These official documents (some of them marked as ‘classified’) provided detail on the structure, selection criteria and process, job description, rewards, and training methods of Internet commentators. While the primary data provided the base of my analysis, news reports from state media regarding Chinese leaders’ instructions and guidance on the establishment of Internet commentator teams, as well as journal articles written by individual officials, were used as supplementary data for the study.

Interviews can provide a reflective or explanatory depth to the subject being explored (Davies 2007). The role of interviews in this thesis is to supplement my research of the decision making processes behind the adoption of Internet policies, the motivation of public opinion guidance via Weibo, and the effectiveness of Internet propaganda strategies. As most of the official publications and documents reflect the party-state’s positions, it is important to conduct in-depth interviews with relevant actors in as broad a range of roles as possible, from scholars in the field, journalists, and pundits in order to obtain a variety of assessments and perspectives on the government’s policies.

Government officials interviewed include: an official from the Propaganda Department in Guangdong Province; two officials from the Bureau for Letters and Calls of the Beijing Municipal Government; and a former official from the Propaganda Department of the Communist Youth League Beijing Committee.

Media workers interviewed include: two journalists responsible for running the Weibo account of Nanhai government, Guangdong; three members of staff from Sina Weibo; a former software engineer from

Baidu; an editor in charge of the Sina Weibo account of a state media company in Guangzhou; an editor from a state TV station in Guangzhou; and a journalist at the Beijing bureau of the Southern Daily in Beijing.

Scholars interviewed include: Yu, Guoming, Director of the Institute of Public Opinion, Renmin University; Zhan, Jiang, Dean of the School of Journalism, China Youth University for Political Sciences; Cai Lihui, Dean of the School of Governance and Crisis Management, Jinan University, Guangzhou; and Yang Xianshun, Deputy Dean of the School of Journalism and Communication, Jinan University, Guangzhou.

For the study of e-government, I adapted Lollar's (2006) analytical framework with minor revisions in the selection of indicators in order to reflect on the development of the Internet in China in the last decade. Lollar (2006) only included 29 provinces in her study, with Ningxia and Shangdong missing, while I included the websites of all 31 provinces. In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the progress made since 2006, I compared Lollar's study with my own examination of the status of provincial portals as of 2014. The same analytical framework was used to study the development of the central government portal (gov.cn) between 2005 and 2014. This has enabled me to draw an additional comparison between e-government services on provincial portals and central government ones. In order to access to central government portal site in 2005, a digital archive called 'Wayback Machine,' which enables users to see archived versions of webpages across time, was used.

Official websites selected for the study of e-government:

gov.cn (<http://www.gov.cn>), the official web portal of the Central Government of China. It is 'an essential part of the e-government initiative, a gateway to all Chinese government information and services, and an interactive channel between government and the public.'¹³ gov.cn has both Chinese and English versions, the latter normally targeting overseas readers.¹⁴ As the focus of this research is on the party-state's Internet strategies in relation to the domestic population, only the Chinese version of the website will be studied.

¹³Gov.cn. 'About Us', http://www.gov.cn/misc/2005-10/24/content_82571.htm (accessed 16 May 2013)

¹⁴Sensitive content, such as news regarding the Dalai Lama or Liu Xiaobo, can only be found on the English version of many government and state media websites.

31 portals of provincial governments in China. At the bottom of the front page of gov.cn there are links to all 31 websites.

Since all three websites selected adopt a 'one-stop-shop' strategy, this allows researchers to access central portals without starting from the subsidiary agency websites (e.g. police or health departments). Therefore, the primary unit of analysis for this study was the homepage of each portal.

For the study of Government Online Message Boards, I visited all five government online message boards and studied messages posted by the public, as well as the government's responses. Two of the message boards studied in this chapter, the Message Board for Ministers and the Direct Line to Zhongnanhai, have ceased to function. For the study of the history and origin of these two message boards, I used the digital archive service 'Wayback Machine.' By searching the websites of the Message Board for Ministers and the Direct Line to Zhongnanhai through Wayback Machine, I was able to visit their archived pages and conduct research.

'Message Board for Local Leaders' (*Difang Lingdao Liuyanban*), dedicated to party chiefs and heads of government at provincial, municipal and county levels.

<http://liuyan.people.com.cn>

'Message Board for Ministers' (*Buwei Lingdao Liuyanban*), dedicated to the head of each ministry

<http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/8198/149530/>

'Direct Line to Zhongnanhai' (*Zhitong Zhongnanhai*), allowed netizens to engage with top party leaders, such as the CCP's General Secretary.

<http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/191862/191863/index.html>

'Mass Line Message Board' (*Qunzhong Luxian Liuyanban*), allowed the public to make suggestions and to comment on the CCP's workings during the 'mass line' campaign.

<http://qzlx.people.com.cn/GB/382736/>

'Message Board for the Premier' (*Wo Xiang Zongli Shuo Juhua*), allowed netizens to communicate with the Premier and ministers of the State Council.

As regards to the study of government Weibo, there are multiple Weibo service providers in China. Among them, Sina Weibo is the very first such service launched in China, and is thus the most popular choice by government offices, CCP departments, and individual officials. Due to their prevalence and popularity, government accounts set up on Sina Weibo were chosen for this study. Non-participatory observation was also a tool in the collection of data on netizens' interactions with government officials on Sina Weibo. I logged on to Sina Weibo with my own credentials, observed, recorded, and analysed conversations between netizens and government on official Weibo pages.

For the selection of study cases, I based my sources on the Chinese Academy of Social Science and the Online Public Opinion Monitoring Office of the *People's Daily Online*, which have been publishing annual reports on China's online public opinion recording of public incidents since 2007. Annual reports published between 2009 and 2014 served as a general guideline in my selection of the most significant cases where Weibo played an important role.

Web content analysis was used in the study of the history and evolution of different state-backed search engines. A digital archive service called 'Wayback Machine' was used to study the design of search engine interfaces that are no longer available on the World Wide Web. The research method of data collection for search engine results in this chapter is borrowed from Jiang (2014), who compared Baidu and Google's results in order to study their sociopolitical implications. To examine how each search engine filters information, I made queries of 20 keywords in Chinese characters on China Search (Chinaso.com) and Baidu (Baidu.com). Comparing search results from select queries on different search engines is known as typical information retrieval research (Jiang 2014: 4), and has been used by other scholars.

I have chosen some of the most prominent sensitive keywords, such as Falun Gong and *Liusi Shijian* (June Fourth Incident)¹⁵, as well as some less sensitive but closely related to current political situations, such as Diaoyu Islands and Taiwan's Independence. According to the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto, Canada, there are 13 lists containing over 9,000 censored and sensitive Chinese keywords

¹⁵ In the West, Beijing's crackdown on the democratic movement is more commonly known as 'Tiananmen Massacre'. Whereas in Chinese language media, it is more often referred as 'June Fourth Incident' (*liusi shijian*). Since this research is on Chinese language search engine, I used the keywords 'June Fourth Incident' instead of 'Tiananmen Massacre' (*liusi tucheng*). Selecting 'June Fourth Incident' over 'Tiananmen Massacre' does not represent my political view on this issue.

compiled by different researchers and institutions on the Internet.¹⁶ A list of the 20 keywords chosen in this research and brief explanations can be found in the appendix I. Search results of each keyword on the first page of China Search and Baidu were recorded and examined.

Finally, my thesis adopts a combination of footnotes and author-date system due to the unique nature of the data collected. For citations of journal articles and monographs, I used an author-date system. For news articles, sources from government websites, Weibo accounts, online message boards, and online forums, I used footnotes. This is for practical reasons. For example, dozens of news reports from the People's Daily Online were cited and the author-date system would result in examples such as PDO 2011a, b, c, e and so on. The Weibo account of Beijing Police Department, Ping'an Beijing, would look like PB 2014a, b, c, d etc. The Message Board for Local Leaders would appear as MBLL 2013a, b, c, d etc. The author-date system thus has the potential to cause confusion among readers.

¹⁶ A full list is available on the Citizen Lab's website:
<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/19eS47Dg086vR1jh9oo51pXstYVT2wft13JGCmAEU7A/pubhtml>

2. Chapter Two: The Changing Concept of Propaganda in China

2.1. Introduction

The authoritarian resilience perspective is centred on the premise of institutional adaptability and responsiveness, where propaganda plays an important role. There are several factors contributing to the party-state's longevity in power, such as its capacity for repression, political co-optation, and the implementation of tactical adaptations in response to an increasingly demanding public (Gilley 2003 and Pei 2014). With regards to repression, its tactics have become more sophisticated, a combination of 'carrots' (manipulating public opinion) and 'sticks' (increasingly heavy handed responses). Instead of simply relying on old-fashioned ideological indoctrination, the propaganda department has learned to implement a mix of harsh censorship and campaigning for popular support (Pei 2012). This is reflected on the Chinese authorities' evolving understanding of propaganda methods and the potential of the Internet, as this chapter will address.

The Chinese party-state is capable of adapting and changing its policies, including propaganda strategies. With the rapid development of ICT, the authorities no longer see the Internet merely as a propaganda tool but they acknowledge its much wider potential. The authorities engage the Internet not only as a realm of potential dissenting voices but also as a structured public space to mobilise grassroots support, provide e-services, improve the state's image, obtain better information from the masses and hopefully, enhance legitimacy. Current literature on Chinese Internet propaganda however, oversimplifies the authorities' response to the Internet as mere censorship and fails to offer a systemic approach regarding how the authorities implement adaptive Internet strategies as a means for achieving broader political objectives.

This chapter begins with a literature review of propaganda and point out that early scholarship focuses only on Internet censorship but fails to see the propaganda and e-governance angles of government policy. It will then offer a brief account of the concept of propaganda in China, and illustrates the shifting emphasis of propaganda work from indoctrination to public opinion guidance due to the growing significance of online public opinion. It will suggest that the party-state's approach towards the Internet

has been further extended to the promotion of e-governance (*wangluo wenzheng*), Internet power and cyber sovereignty.

2.2. Understanding Propaganda

The CCP's adaptability can be observed in its changing understanding of propaganda throughout the years. This section begins with a brief account of the concept of propaganda in the West. The English term 'propaganda' originated from the West and is usually associated with negative connotations, whereas in China the concept of 'propaganda' (*xuanchuan*) is more neutral. The origin of the propaganda apparatus was the establishment of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV in order to disseminate its doctrine. It had its own printing press and propaganda seminary to train workers of the Congregation. The Roman Catholic Church's intention was to regulate and control doctrinal purity and orthodoxy in its missionary operations (Cunningham 2002). According to some scholars, this characterisation led to negative perceptions of the term 'propaganda.'¹⁷ Until the mid-1930s, those attempting to mobilise mass public opinion referred to their work as propaganda, borrowing the name and its original concept from the Congregation (Jackall ed. 1995).

Many leading scholars and practitioners of the time considered propaganda as a neutral concept whereas in China, it remains a neutral term. Bernays (1923: 212) suggests that, 'the only difference between 'propaganda' and 'education' really is in the point of view. The advocacy of what we believe in is education. The advocacy of what we don't believe is propaganda.' During the Second World War, the term 'propaganda' underwent a series of metamorphoses, from morale to psychological warfare. By the late 1940s, persuasion, communication and information had become common terms for what was formerly called propaganda (Sproule 2005: 29).

In the West, the term propaganda is usually associated with Nazi Germany or Stalin's Soviet Union and hence is regarded as negative (Ellul 1965). Propaganda is considered as consisting mainly of exaggerated stories disseminated by means of lies (Ellul 1965: x): 'The deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognition, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the

17 Quoted in Cunningham (2002: 16).

desired intent of the propagandist' (Jowett and O'Donnell 1992: 4). It is seen as shaping and manipulating public opinion, and therefore, as a serious threat to democracy (Cunningham 2002). Based on studies of propaganda strategies employed by states participating in the First World War, Lasswell (1938 [1927]: 221) described propaganda as 'control of opinion by significant symbols... by stories, rumours, reports, pictures, and other forms of social communication.' It is very similar to the propaganda work adopted by the CCP in modern day China. Shambaugh (2007: 29) defines propaganda (*xuanchuan*) in China as, '(the CCP) writing and disseminating the information that it believes should be transmitted to, and inculcated in, various sectors of the populace.'

Shambaugh (2007: 29) further suggests that in addition to direct bureaucratic intervention, the Propaganda Department imposes a 'passive control' capability in the form of self-censorship. Kurlantzick and Link (2009) maintain that the CCP's thought work is 'certainly censorship.' According to Kalashil and Boas (2001), reactive strategies include direct efforts to counter or circumscribe the potential challenges outlined above by clamping down on Internet use, such as filtering content or blocking websites, whereas proactive measures include distributing propaganda on the Internet and implementing e-government services that increase citizen satisfaction with the government.

This thesis suggests that the CCP's approach towards the Internet has gone beyond censorship and is moving to a more adaptive and innovative ways. However, current scholarly research on Chinese propaganda focuses mainly on censorship and on the control of information (e.g. Chase and Mulvenon 2002; Harwit and Clark 2001; Jiang 2010; Kalathil and Boas 2003; Kurlantzick and Link 2009; Lagerkvist 2006; MacKinnon 2009; Qiu 1999; Tsui 2003). Shambaugh (2007) and Brady (2008) provide detailed accounts of the development, structure, and role of the Chinese Communist Party propaganda mechanisms in the post-Deng Xiaoping era. Shambaugh acknowledges that the CCP's propaganda departments have lost some of their control in the face of various emerging factors, such as technological development, marketisation, social pluralisation, globalisation and commercialisation of the media. Brady (2008: 137-139) observes that as early as the late 1990s, the rise of the Internet in China prompted the development of foreign propaganda systems in order to respond to the new environment, while Chinese leadership has long recognised the significance of the Internet in both pro and anti-China propaganda.

Although the works of Shambaugh and Brady were published more than a decade after the Internet was introduced in China, they offer no systematic account of how the Chinese government actually integrates the Internet into its propaganda system. In the meantime, two Western-based Internet research projects on China, 'Internet Filtering in China' and the 'Berkeley China Internet Project,' have both focused on the Internet control methods implemented by the Chinese party-state (Damm 2007). Chase and Mulvenon (2002: xiii) examine how the Chinese party-state employs what they called 'low-tech Leninist' measures, such as surveillance, informants, searches, and confiscation of computers to counter balance the political impact of Chinese dissidents on the Internet.

Beyond these narrow approaches that focus on Internet control and the well-developed literature on Internet censorship, few studies have fully examined the government's proactive strategies. Shambaugh (2007) and Chase and Mulvenon (2002) point out that the CCP employs proactive efforts on the Internet in order to consolidate its power, but they stop short of exploring how exactly the party-state uses the Internet to engage in proactive propaganda. Zhou (2006) acknowledges that whereas information in Chinese society has been subject to strict control, the CCP has also tightened up regulations, as well as taken proactive steps to control the Internet. Zhou, nevertheless, only uses Qiangguo Forum, a popular online forum of the CCP's mouthpiece, the People's Daily, as a case study to demonstrate the proactive policy implemented by the party-state. He concludes that the Chinese state creates 'a relatively controlled public sphere on the Internet by selectively opening up some previously controlled space and trying to channel political discourse in the direction it most desires' (Zhou 2006: 153-154). Published in 2006, Zhou's case study is slightly out-of-date as there have been a number of other, more sophisticated proactive strategies employed by the party-state since 2006, such as the deployment of Internet commentators and the launch of state-sponsored search engines.

In recent years, there has been an increasing proportion of literature looking at China's Internet policies from perspectives other than propaganda. Zheng (2007) argues that the Internet empowers both the state and society, as this new technology has created a new channel for conducting politics as well as an interactive platform between the state and society. A detailed account is given to illustrate how the Internet might empower society and engender pressure on the regime. Nonetheless, the author argues, the party-state could take it as an opportunity to enhance its governance. Drawing from extensive data including both statistics and case studies, Zheng points out that as long as collective action does not pose

a threat to the CCP's survival, interaction between the state and society not only benefits social groups, but may also promote political change. I argue that although the Internet does act as a force that fosters mutual empowerment, it does not lead to political change, as I will illustrate in the empirical chapters.

Supported by several high-profile cases in 2003 and 2004, Tai (2006) demonstrates how China's Internet users exerted pressure on the party-state to change the course of events in favour of public demands, which led him to conclude that the Internet democratises communication of information in Chinese society, and allows netizens to engage in public debates on social and political issues. Examining the evolving interplay between the Internet and civil society, Tai (2013) suggests that the rapid development of the Internet offers new opportunities for the growth of civil society by bringing to life a new type of social space, as well as by redefining social relations. He argues that in spite of government's efforts, the Internet has increasingly become a tool for the netizens to challenge the state.

Yang (2009) tries to understand the connections between political participation and social change by analysing China's online activism. Considering online activism as an Internet-related struggle which includes cultural, economic, political, social, and technological forces, he shows how Chinese people 'have created a world of carnival, community, and contention in and through cyberspace and how in this process they have transformed personhood, society and politics' (p. 1). Yang adopts a direct participation methodology by immersing himself in Chinese cyberspace for a decade, establishing his own blog, monitoring BBS forums and various websites, and questioning other netizens. According to Yang, through further development of online activism, people's aspirations for basic citizenship rights will be mobilised. He is optimistic that these civic engagements in an 'unofficial democracy' may lead to democracy in China.

Zhang and Zheng (2009) point out that the government not only controls the new ICT but also uses it to mobilise social support for its own cause. By doing so and in a spillover effect, it offers new opportunities for other social forces to further their own causes. The authors argue that the relationship between the state and society is not always a zero-sum one, but it can be mutually empowering (p. 4). Zhang (2010: 44) points out that the Chinese party-state has been actively exploiting innovations in ICT to reconstruct its image. Jiang (2010a) argues that the party-state's approach and practices on the Internet are linked

with its advocacy of legitimacy in five major areas: the economy, nationalism, ideology, culture, and governance. She observes that while promoting Internet technology, China also tightly control the online sphere. The author suggests that China's Internet policies will continue to reflect what she calls 'authoritarian informationalism,' an Internet development and regulatory model that combines elements of capitalism, authoritarianism, and Confucianism (p. 82).

In another work, Jiang (2010b) argues that a modern authoritarian government has to allow for some forms of political discussion and participation from which popular consent to authoritarian rule is derived. Adapting the concept of authoritarian deliberation (He 2006) from an offline environment to an online one, Jiang proposes four types of online spaces of authoritarian deliberation, central propaganda spaces, government-regulated commercial spaces, emergent civic spaces, and international deliberative spaces. She suggests that although the party-state allows for a limited level of public discussion and deliberation on economic, social, and political affairs, the spaces for public deliberation are often factional, nationalistic, and incoherent (p. 16). Compared with mainstream scholarship that focuses on studying how the CCP imposes censorship on the Internet, Jiang's works allow us to understand the Internet in China from a more pragmatic angle, which is similar to my argument that censorship is only one side of the coin. Sullivan (2014) observes that in the face of mounting pressure from online public opinion, the Chinese party-state manage to make use of Internet technologies, such as Weibo, as a feedback mechanism to adapt its policies and direct propaganda efforts. In other words, the CCP is utilising the microblogosphere to its own advantage (p. 24).

In the meantime, some scholars examine the CCP's Internet policy from other perspectives such as e-government and promoting good governance. Tang (2000) suggests that a primary function of e-government in China should be to build and strengthen government-to-citizen connections, through features such as online forums. Cartledge and Lovelock (1999) argue that although the ICT contributes to the modernisation of the economy and helps to decentralise decision-making, allowing more transparency in administrative processes, it also enables the CCP to gain stronger control over the state. Wong and Welch (2004) worry that the new government-citizen interface emerging under e-government could be used by the CCP as an additional channel for further propaganda and control instead of a means to promote better accountability of the party-state. Kluver (2005: 76) provides a more critical argument by suggesting that the purpose of e-government initiatives in China is not to empower the public, but to re-

establish the control of the state, such as improving the quality of surveillance and data collection, and hence policy-making, the elimination of corruption, and ultimately, the re-legitimation of the party-state.

e-government allows for a better communication between different government departments, roundly improving the dialogue mechanisms between citizens and state, and facilitating the transformation of the party-state from government-centric to service-centric (Shuo et al 2002). Wang (2011) argues that the goal of e-government is to innovate government management, to improve government services, and to enhance the government's image. Zhang (2000) believes that e-government is promoted in order to innovate governance and public services with the help of information technology. He argues that it becomes a virtue of government by offering convenient, fast and good public services for citizens, with the potential to increase state capacity and efficiency, as well as to improve the policy making process. By doing so, it may lead to an open and accountable government. The above authors' views are in line with my argument that e-governance initiatives achieve dual purposes: they serve the public on the one hand, while benefiting the state on the other.

2.3. The Growing Importance of Online Public Opinion

While the scholars above try to define the connotation of 'propaganda' in China, the CCP's own propaganda strategy is not monotonous and inflexible, rather it keeps evolving according to the changing environment, in particular the rapid development of the Internet and Internet population. The number of Internet users in China increased from 620,000 in 1997 to 731 million by the end of 2016.¹⁸ It surpassed the United States in 2008 as the largest country in terms of netizen population. In spite of tight controls from the Propaganda Department of the CCP on the flow of information and strict regulation by the government, the Internet in China has grown at a remarkable pace. As of December 2015, China had 423 million websites, with the majority registered as commercial.¹⁹ The size of the Internet and its link to online public opinion brought many unprecedented challenges to the party-state.

18 China Internet Network Information Center. 2017. 'Di 39ci zhongguo hulian wangluo fazhan zhuangkang tongji baogao (The 39th Survey Report on China's Internet Development)', 22 January. <https://cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201706/P020170608523740585924.pdf> (accessed 29 June 2017).

19 Ibid.

Before the expansion of the Internet, the Chinese government manipulated public opinion through the domination of mass media. Traditional media—newspapers, televisions, and radios—were under strict control from the Propaganda Department of the CCP, with information censored by the CCP before publication or broadcasting to ensure that it was in compliance with the party line.²⁰ The Internet, however, brings a new dimension and challenges to the CCP in manufacturing consent. The internet has created a zone of freedom, relatively independent from the authorities (Hu 2008; Lagerkvist 2007). It is more difficult for the media or the state to manipulate public opinion due to the diversification of the information flows (Luo 2014 and Qiang 2010). Anyone can set up their own website; any amateur can be a 'citizen journalist' and file stories or photos on the Internet. Exercising total control on discussions and comments on online forums is less effective than seeking to control traditional media. During Under Hu Jintao,'s reign and in the early years of Xi Jinping's ruling, the public enjoyed relatively more freedom on the cyberspaceline compared with on the traditional media.

One of the consequences of Internet development in China is the rise of political protests which originate online (Zheng 2007). Social unrest has been rising steadily in recent years, with more than 80,000 'mass incidents' in 2007, up from 60,000 in 2006, according to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Page 2011). This figure jumped to 180,000 in 2010 (Orlik 2011) and dropped down to 28,950 in 2015.²¹ Many of the protests were organized with the aid of the Internet, e-mail, BBS, online forums, blogs, and other social media.

Although China's state media maintain a substantial hold on shaping the agenda of Chinese Internet discussion, news is increasingly broken online (Hassid 2015). Shirk (2011: 2) suggest that 'because of its speed, the Internet is the first place news appears, as it sets the agenda for other media.' In a democratic country, the Internet undermines the ability of politicians to control the dissemination of information, as well as the process of governance and decision-making (Savigny 2002). In regards to modern liberal democratic systems, Savigny argues that the Internet can 'revolutionise political communication and the nature of public opinion expression and formation' (Savigny 2002: 4).

20 For more discussions on China's propaganda system, see Brady, Anne-Marie. 2008. *Marketing dictatorship: Propaganda and thought work in contemporary China*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.; Brady. 2009. 'Mass Persuasion as a Means of Legitimation and China's Popular Authoritarianism'. *American Behavioral Scientist* 53(3): 434-457. ; and Shambaugh, David. 2007. 'China's propaganda system: Institutions, processes and efficacy', *The China Journal* (57): 25-58.

21The reasons of a sharp decline of number include, government manipulation of figures, Xi Jinping's strengthening crackdown of protests etc. For more discussion see He, Qinglian. 2016. '2015 nian zhongguo quntixing shijian de xin tedian (New trends of mass incidents in China, 2015),' 23 January. Boxun News. http://boxun.com/news/gb/pubvp/2016/01/201601231016.shtml#_VrsPAadmifZ (accessed 24 January 2016)

There were 180,000 cases of protests, strikes, and other mass disturbances in 2010,²² some of them organised with the aid of the Internet through blogs, e-mail, online forums, and Weibo. Public opinion formulated in the cyberspace has translated into public pressure and, on some occasions, brought down corrupt officials or forced the party-state to adjust policies. The following four cases, which received immense attention in the Chinese cyberspace, attempt to demonstrate that the outcomes of each incident were consistent with the preferences of online public opinion so long as they did not threaten the position of the central government.

Case one relates to the exposure of a CCP official's corrupt behavior by netizens, which led to his dismissal and sentence to prison. A photo of Zhou Jiugeng, the director of the Housing Department of a local district in Nanjing, was posted to Tianya, one of the most popular online forums in China on 14 December 2008. Zhou was shown in the photo smoking expensive cigarettes that are well beyond the reach of his salary. The following week, he was exposed by different netizens for allegedly wearing a luxury watch, and driving an expensive car. On 22 December, the secretary of the CCP Nanjing Committee promised that they 'shall listen to the opinion of the netizens' regarding the complaints linked to Zhou.²³ On 28 December, Zhou was dismissed for purchasing expensive cigarettes with public funds; a party official of Nanjing pointed out that all party members should be accountable to Internet public opinion, and an investigation against Zhou based on other accusations made by netizens was launched. On 10 October 2009, Zhou was sentenced to 11 years in jail for corruption.

Case two concerns netizens invited for the first time to participate in an official investigation. A newspaper in Yunnan reported on 13 February 2009 that a criminal suspect was found dead in a detention center. The explanation from the police that he died while 'playing hide and seek' with other detainees was widely rejected by netizens, who demanded justice. On 19 February, the Propaganda Department of Yunnan invited netizens to join the 15-member inquiry committee. The committee was chaired and co-chaired by two netizens, along with six more netizens, four officials, and three journalists.²⁴ It was the first time in China that netizens were invited to participate in an official investigation (Yu, Guoming, 2010: 63).

22 Orlik, Tom. 2011. 'Unrest Grows as Economy Booms', *The Wall Street Journal*. (26 September). <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111903703604576587070600504108.html> (accessed 6 June 2015). The Chinese government seldom publish statistics on public incidents, which makes it difficult to obtain the latest and most reliable figures.

23 Xinhua News Agency. 2008. 'Jiangning fangguangju huiying tianjiayan juzhang shijian(Jiangning Housing Department's response to the extravagant cigarettes incident)', (30 December) http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2008-12/30/content_10578300_1.htm (accessed 17 November 2014)

24 Sina News. 2009. 'Canyu duomaomao shijian diaocha wangyou mingdan gongbu (List of netizens participating hide and seek inquiry committee announced)', 19 February. <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2009-02-19/234617249660.shtml> (accessed 17 November 2014)

Eventually, two police officers of the detention center were sentenced to jail for neglecting their duty, which indirectly led to the death of the victim.

In case three, a woman who killed a CCP official was freed due to enormous support from netizens. On 10 May 2009, Deng Yujiao, a waitress in Hubei Province stabbed a CCP official to death and seriously injured another while resisting sexual harassment by them. She was arrested for manslaughter, nevertheless netizens showed no sympathy for the dead official (Wang, Yuanyuan. 2010). A number of netizens arrived at the city where Deng was detained, assisted Deng's family and filed numerous reports and photos on major online forums regarding the development of the case. On 22 May, All-China Women's Federation, the state-sponsored organization, issued a statement on its website, calling for 'protecting the rights of women' and pledged to 'closely follow the case of Deng.'²⁵ Two other officials who were also involved in the harassment of Deng on 10 May were later sacked for misconduct. On 16 June, Deng was freed without charge by the government.

In the fourth case, a deputy police chief made a public apology for the crime of his drunk driving son due to outrage among netizens. In the evening of 16 October 2010, a drunk driver, Li Qiming, killed a student and injured another in Hebei University. Refusing to accept responsibility, he was allegedly threatening the security guards of the university that his father is Li Gang. The incident was promptly posted to online forums in China and Li Gang was soon identified by netizens as the deputy director of a local police department. In the meantime, Li senior was revealed by netizens for having two properties registered under his name, and his 22-year-old son was revealed to own three (Wan, Lixin. 2010). Official newspapers kept up the pressure by publishing commentaries calling the authorities to probe into those accusations. In the meantime, the official China Central Television aired an interview with Li Gang in which he wept in an apology to the families of the student killed by his son. Li Qiming was sentenced to six years in prison.

The government faces difficulty in manipulating public opinion in cyberspace. Take case two for example, ranked the fourth most read piece of news by Chinese netizens in 2009, which attracted over 120,000 threads and 1.1 million comments on online forums, and 17,000 articles on blogs (Yu, Guoming, 2010: 10-11). However, state media did not show the same level of interest in this incident. In case three, it attracted more than 110,000 threads and 86,000 comments on online forums and 120,000 blog articles,

²⁵ All-China Women's Federation. 2010. 'Yifa wei hu funu quanyi (Protect women's right within legal framework)'. (22 May). <http://www.women.org.cn/allnews/29/81.html> (accessed 17 November 2014)

while only received 2,920 reports from the traditional media in total (Yu, Guoming, 2010: 10-11). Apparently, there is a gap between what the government wants the people to focus on (via traditional media) and what the public wants to know (through Internet). This is evident in the fact that the most reported stories by the traditional state media on television, in newspapers, and on the radio were inconsistent with what the netizens were concerned with (Yu 2010, Yu 2011).

In a society with free media and a democratic political system, public opinion can influence the outcome of public policy. The impact of public opinion on policy making in China was relatively insignificant before the Internet, as the party-state did not necessarily have to consider the view of the people while making decisions. With regards to the cases mentioned above however, it is important to distinguish responsiveness from accountability. Responsiveness means official response to the public, while accountability refers to 'routinised citizen response to official action' (Hassid 2015: 43). Even if the authorities are responsive to online public pressure in on some occasions, it does not imply that officials are very accountable to the public. The cases presented above are in line with research conducted by King et al (2013), who found that online posts with negative criticism of the Chinese authorities, officials, and their policies are not more likely to be censored. The censorship mechanism, the authors argue, is aimed at 'curtailing collective action by silencing comments that represent, reinforce, or spur social mobilization' (2013: 1).

In the face of the growing influence of the Internet, the CCP shows its flexibility and acts in accordance with the wishes of the public when a controversial event enjoys the backing of online public opinion and does not pose a direct threat to the party-state of the central government, as shown in the above four case studies. There are several reasons behind the party-state's actions. Given the nature of the cyberspace, the state can no longer exert full control of this new technology. Furthermore, by selectively being accountable to the people on certain occasions, it seeks to ease tensions between society and the state, therefore rallying public support and enhancing legitimacy. In the early stage of Internet development in China, online forums, chat rooms, and bulletin boards were the most popular platforms for the netizens to express their views.

The Chinese party-state has been closely following the Internet's development and seeking ways to manage it in an adaptive way. There are five factors that led the party-state to introduce innovative

strategies. These include: a constant increase in the number of Internet users; the need to diversify sources of information; the development of information and communication technologies; media marketisation and commercialisation, both of which contribute to the fifth and most important factor—the importance of shaping online public opinion.

The first factor that affects the CCP's choice of propaganda strategies is the increasing number of Internet users. At the end of 2016, China had over 730 million Internet users, and the Internet penetration rate reached 52.3%.²⁶ Over a quarter of the total figure come from rural areas, or 196 million.²⁷ 55% of Internet users are aged between 20 and 39, and 20% have university or postgraduate degrees.²⁸ This demographic structure suggests that those who have access to the Internet are not limited to urban and educated citizens, but come from a much wider variety of backgrounds. This vast and diverse Internet population have a strong desire to express their opinion freely, and actively participate in social events (Peng 2008). Chinese netizens are also highly involved in political matters that transcend from the local into the national level: traffic accidents or misconduct by officials were frequently associated with incompetence and corruption in the entire government (Du and Li 2011; Yin 2011; Yu 2010).

Bimber (1999) argues that the Internet provides new opportunities for citizens to engage in different political activities, including coordinating or organising political actions. Some scholars, such as Browning (1996) and Rheingold (1991), suggest that the Internet prompts citizens to become more actively expressive, and to seize new opportunities to communicate with government officials. Changes in ICT have the potential to lead to changes in political behavior, and the Internet is bound to increase the flow of communication between citizens and government, thus altering the patterns of influence between elites and the mass public.²⁹ With half of the Chinese population using the Internet and the number of users continuing to grow, the CCP face new challenges and opportunities. Managing netizens to its advantage requires of the party-state to adopt new strategies.

26 China Internet Network Information Center. 2017. 'Di 39ci zhongguo hulian wangluo fazhan zhuangkang tongji baogao (The 39th Survey Report on China's Internet Development)', 22 January. <https://cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201706/P020170608523740585924.pdf> (accessed 29 June 2017).

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 For more discussion on the connection between the Internet and expanded citizen communication with the government, see Bimber (1999).

The second factor that has had an impact on the CCP's propaganda strategies is the diversification of information sources. The Internet has become an important source of information among Chinese citizens, and thus undermines the effectiveness of traditional media propaganda. Prior to the arrival of the Internet, the party-state exercised tight control of mass media. Traditional media outlets—newspapers, television, and radio stations—were under strict control from the Propaganda Department of the CCP, where information was censored by the CCP before publication or broadcast to ensure that they were in compliance with the party line. Prior to the arrival of the Internet, Chinese citizens could only receive news via state media; in other words, only news approved by the government could be heard. Internet media, in addition to online forums, chat rooms, and social media, are less controlled by the party-state, and thus provide alternative information sources to the official media.

Since the state media lack credibility in the eyes of the general public,³⁰ the Internet has become an alternative source of information. Objective information might be the key in achieving an organic formation and change of opinion, whilst trying to manipulate opinion deliberately is usually unsuccessful. An article in the journal *Qiushi* (Seeking Truth), the CCP's top party theory magazine, points out that 'Chinese people today are no longer assessing their political leaders according to the party's program and principles, but rather according to its capacity and efficiency in solving real social problems' (Nie and Hu 2008: 20). As it has become more difficult for the party-state to effectively control public opinion through traditional media, the CCP has tried to diversify its channels via the Internet to disseminate information.

The third factor that drives change in official policy vis-à-vis the Internet is technological change. Rapid developments in information and communication technologies, such as smart phones and wireless connections, have changed information flows from one-way to two-way. People do not necessarily receive information by sitting in front of a television or radio, or by reading a hard-copy newspaper. They can now receive information through the Internet and respond to it. Each development in technological communication has raised concerns in respect of its impact and influence on public opinion (Savigny 2002). The Internet has drastically altered the flow of information, from a monopoly by the government to more diverse channels. Similar to a Facebook and Twitter user, a Weibo user can post anything on his or

30 For more discussion on the credibility of China's state media, see Ping Shum, 2012. 'China's media expansion overseas: an effective strategy of enhancing China's 'soft power' globally?' Essay submitted for the module The Politics of China, at the University of Cambridge.

her account without being censored in advance.³¹ Any amateur can be a 'citizen journalist' and file stories or photos on social media.

In contemporary modern liberal democracies, public opinion is generally mediated by the mass media, either through the presentation of opinion polls, or more generally in the reflection and/ or creation of public opinion (Savigny 2002). The public is not in control of what is presented, and is usually only able to react or respond to media content (Negrine 1989). Carpini and Williams (1994) argue that the interaction between television and a viewer is similar to a conversation, although it is one-sided: TVs 'talk' to their audience. Their finding indicates that people play an active role in the formation of opinions by having conversations with others. The interactive function of the Internet has further strengthened this role, as netizens use social media as a platform to exchange opinions, thus formulating public opinion on the Internet. The government can no longer control the flow of information as effectively as it has through traditional media, and thus needs to introduce new strategies in order to have its voice heard on the Internet. The party-state has to be innovative in order to have its information delivered.

The fourth factor in Internet policy strategising is the development of media marketisation and commercialisation. The marketisation and commercialisation of mass media in China, social media in particular, have diversified the media environment (Lynch 1999; Scotton and Hachten 2010; Stockmann 2013; Zhao 1998). In order to attract readers and advertisers, media outlets need to publish more content related to audiences' interests, and in many cases, against the party-state's interests. The media in China was fully subsidised by the state prior to the economic reform of 1978 (Zhao 1998). As government funding was reduced in the 1980s, the media, both print and electronic, was forced to find other sources of financing. Commercialisation was the obvious answer.

Besides state subsidies, advertising has become the most important source of revenue for media outlets, which subsequently transformed the nature of news media, ensuring that the press would be more concerned with making a profit than with playing politics (Zhao 1998). Compared with traditional media, the Internet in China is even more driven by commercial interests and is dominated by major Internet content providers such as NetEase, Sina, Sohu, and Tencent. This commercialisation of the Internet has

31 The Internet service provider may delete sensitive content only after it has been posted.

underpinned much of the 'trivialisation and de-politicisation' of Internet content and usage in China (Damm 2007: 291). Meanwhile, higher levels of media marketisation promoted the ability of the CCP to guide public opinion through news media (Stockmann 2013). The CCP can no longer merely rely on the traditional media to spread its messages, but also has to introduce proactive methods to directly engage with the public via the Internet.

The fifth, and most important, factor that led the CCP to adopt more innovative propaganda strategies on the Internet is the increasing clout of online public opinion. Public opinion is crucial for political actors to maintain their legitimacy and the political party-state (Savigny 2002). The CCP enjoyed a considerable level of leverage of public opinion through the domination of mass media until the arrival of the Internet. One of the consequences of Internet development in China is the rise of political protests that originated online (Zheng 2007). Social unrest has been rising steadily in recent years, with more than 80,000 'mass incidents' in 2007, up from 60,000 in 2006 (Page 2011). This figure jumped to 180,000 in 2010.³²

Social discontent and mass protests undermine the stability of society, and subsequently threaten the rule of the CCP. Increasing numbers of protests were organised with the aid of the Internet, e-mail, online forums, blogs, and other social media, such as Weibo. Speierm (1980) argues that public opinion does not exist in autocratic regimes, as the government will suppress it. For public opinion to function, there must be access to information on the issues with which public opinion is concerned. The Internet in China, however, acts as a new medium, providing information alternative to the official line, thus creating an unprecedented opportunity for the separate formulation of public opinion.

In a society with free media and a democratic political system, public opinion can influence the outcome of public policy (Gamson and Modigliani 1989). Studying the formation of public opinion in the United States on nuclear power, Gamson and Modigliani use 'value-added processes' to describe the development of nuclear power discourse. This process shows similarities in the formation of online public opinion with China (Zhou and Moy 2007). In many significant public incidents concerning official misbehaviour or government scandals, the starting point is a news event initially receiving insufficient coverage. When netizens show great interest in this event and discuss it intensely online, those online

32 Orlik, Tom. 2011. 'Unrest Grows as Economy Booms', *The Wall Street Journal*. (26 September). <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111903703604576587070600504108.html> (accessed 6 June 2015). N.B. The Chinese government seldom publish statistics on public incidents, which makes it difficult to obtain the latest and most reliable figures.

discussions add meaning and news value to the event and turn it into an issue. Subsequently, when the state media come back to report this issue, a public opinion is already formulated. The impact of public opinion on policy making in China was relatively insignificant before the Internet age, as the party-state did not feel it necessary to consider the views of the people when making decisions. One should note that although the Internet has empowered netizens to some extent, which led the authorities to accommodate online public opinion, the regime also steps up its control on the Internet. For instance, censorship on WeChat and Sina Weibo is dynamic and often reactive to news events. Research on WeChat finds that keywords that trigger censors get updated as the environment of sensitive material evolves (Ruan et al 2017). In August 2017, China's Cyberspace Administration accused Weibo, WeChat and Baidu's Tieba forum of failing to comply with the country's strict cybersecurity laws that ban content which is violent, obscene, or deemed offensive to the ruling Communist Party.³³ Needless to say, the goal of those repressive measures was to put social media under tight control, and to tame content on the Internet. In the meantime, the authorities also try to manage public opinion in a more positive way, a dual policy of carrot and stick.

2.4. From Propaganda to Public Opinion Guidance

As public opinion generated on the Internet becomes more influential, the party-state can no longer simply ignore it, but needs to adopt new strategies to better direct public views. In China, the concept of propaganda and the methods of conducting propaganda have been evolving since Mao Zedong. Mao (1945: 1094) stated in 1945 that 'ideological education is the key link to be grasped in uniting the whole Party for great political struggles. Unless this is done, the Party cannot accomplish any of its political tasks.' Shambaugh (2007: 26) called Mao a 'master propagandist,' who was skilled in indoctrination. Deng Xiaoping (1956: 225), Mao's de facto successor, also embraced the concept of indoctrination by advocating 'propagating the Party's views until they become the views of the masses, and organising the masses to put these views into effect.' In the post-Deng period, the connotation of the CCP's propaganda work has been shifting towards an emphasis on guidance of public opinion, or persuasion.

33 Cadell, Cate. 2017, 'China investigates top local social media sites in push to control content,' Reuters, 11 August <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-cyber/china-investigates-top-local-social-media-sites-in-push-to-control-content-idUSKBN1AR07K> (accessed 12 August 2017)

In 1992, the CCP officially endorsed the idea of guiding public opinion in a policy document.³⁴ The party-state recognises that its ability to control what people think has declined due to the economic reform started in the 1980s, and has subsequently diverted its focus from political ideology to social agenda (Chan 2007). The introduction of public opinion guidance has become the prevailing slogan of the party-state's media policy since the 1990s. In 1994, Jiang Zemin advocated public opinion guidance as the keystone of the CCP's propaganda work.³⁵ Though guidance of public opinion in support of the party line and of its policies remains a strong element of the CCP's thought work, the emphasis has shifted towards cultivating and steering public opinion in favour of the state.

Given the expansion of Internet media and the growing Internet population in China, a new form of public opinion is taking shape in the virtual world of the Internet, which has started to influence government policy-making, and which was eventually brought under the radar of the CCP's propagandists. In the first national propaganda work conferences held by Hu Jintao since his appointment as General Secretary of the CCP in 2002, he urged Party propaganda officials to improve their work on the new media and to push forward initiatives of public opinion guidance.³⁶ Jiang (2010a) believes that the Chinese government uses the Internet not only to consolidate its control of society, but also to enhance its legitimacy. Liu (2007) suggests that the government should fully exploit the Internet as the medium for agenda-setting by proactively releasing news and disseminating positive information.

As the development of the Internet progresses further, the party-state has made adjustments and introduced more innovative propaganda strategies—in demonstration of authoritarian resilience's adapt and change factors. The 'Decision of the CCP Central Committee on Strengthening the Party's Ruling Ability' adopted in September 2004 points out that '[the party's] ability to guide public opinion has to be improved, the Internet's development and supervision urgently needs to be reinforced and reformed.'³⁷

The decision, which was passed at the Sixth Plenary Session of the Seventeenth CCP Central

34 Chan 2007. While China Media Project of the University of Hong Kong suggests that this term first appeared in 6 May 1989 in a magazine published internally by the Propaganda Department. See <http://cmp.hku.hk/2007/07/05/423/> (accessed 14 May 2015). Yin Yungong, a Chinese scholar based in China, however, argues that it was Jiang Zemin, then president of China, who first proposed the idea of guiding public opinion in a speech given in 1996. See Fan, Jingyi and Wang, Junchao eds., 2009. *Dangbao Xuanchuan Yishu Xinlun (New Theory on Art of Propaganda of Party Newspapers)*, *People's Daily Press*: Beijing. P.140

35 Jiang Zemin, 'Zai quanguo xuanchuan sixiang gongzuo huiyi shang de jianghua (24 January 1994)' ['Speech to national work conference on propaganda and ideological work'], in Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, ed., *Shisida Yilai Zhongyao Wenxian Xuanbian [Selection of Important Documents Since the Fourteenth Party Congress]* (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1996), p. 653. Available at *People's Daily Online*. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/67481/69242/> (accessed 15 March 2015)

36 Xinhua Net. 2003. 'Hu Jintao zai xuanchuan huiyi jianghua: yong sange daibiao tongling xuanchuan gongzuo (Hu Jintao's speech at the propaganda work conference: command propaganda work with three represents)', (7 December). http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2003-12/07/content_1218040.htm (accessed 12 May 2015)

37 Xinhua Net. 2004. 'Guanyu jiaqiang dang zhizheng nengli jianshe de jue ding (Decision of the CCP Central Committee on strengthening the party's ruling ability)', 26 September. http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2004-09/26/content_2024232.htm (accessed 12 June 2015)

Committee, promotes the strengthening of the online propaganda force in order to cultivate a 'positive public opinion' on the Internet.³⁸ This is believed to be the first important document concerning Internet propaganda policy openly published by the CCP Central Committee.³⁹

In January 2007, the CCP Politburo held a seminar dedicated to studying the development of Internet technology worldwide, as well as to furthering the construction and regulation of China's Internet culture.⁴⁰ During the seminar, Hu, the General Secretary, urged party officials at all levels to enhance their knowledge of the Internet; party and government departments at all levels were advised to take measures to build public opinion guidance forces and government websites.⁴¹ The CCP Central Committee released a document regarding the construction and regulation of Internet culture soon after the closing of the seminar, which has become the guideline and framework of Internet propaganda policy.⁴² As Weibo became increasingly popular, the party-state extended their attention to social media. In October 2011, the CCP Central Committee passed another document, not only reiterating the importance of online public opinion guidance, but mentioning in particular the strengthening of social media opinion guidance.⁴³

In the past few years, the party-state also continued to emphasise to role of the Internet in directing and representing public opinion, in addition to stepping up measures to control online content. In a speech to the Party's News and Public Opinion Work Conference in February 2016, Xi said '[we much] adhere to the correct guidance of public opinion. Party newspapers and journals at various levels, and television and radio stations, all must abide by correct guidance.'⁴⁴ An editorial from the People's Daily called on 'capacity building' in guiding public opinion to better rally public support and enthusiasm for achieving the Chinese dream. One of the latest examples was President Xi asking officials to have 'greater tolerance and patience' with netizens, adding that officials need to draw suggestions and feedback from the Internet, help clarify public misconception, and dissolve public discontents and grievances.⁴⁵ There is a

38 Ibid.

39 General Administration of Press and Publication. 'Xinwen chuban zongshu caiqu cuoshi, jiaqiang wangluo wenhua jianshe he guanli (The General Administration of Press and Publication takes measure to strengthen the construction and regulation of online culture).'

<http://www.wangbianzheng.com/NewsView-94.aspx> (accessed 12 June 2015)

40 Xinhua Net. 2007. 'Hu Jintao: yi chuangxin jingshen jiaqiang wangluo wenhua jianshe guanli (Hu Jintao: strengthening the construction and regulation of online culture with innovative spirit).' 24 January. http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2007-01/24/content_5648188.htm (accessed 10 June 2015)

41 Ibid.

42 General Administration of Press and Publication. 'Xinwen chuban zongshu caiqu cuoshi, jiaqiang wangluo wenhua jianshe he guanli (The General Administration of Press and Publication takes measure to strengthen the construction and regulation of online culture).'

43 China News Agency, 'Zhongyang tichu jiaqiang wangluo wenhua guanli (The Central Committee advocates the strengthening of Internet culture management).'

25 October. <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2011/10-25/3414069.shtml> (accessed 10 June 2015)

44 *People's Daily Online*. 2016. 'Xi's speech on news reporting resonates with domestic outlets,' 23 February.

<http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0223/c90785-9019712.html>

45 Xinhua News. 2016. 'China's Xi calls for better development of Internet,' 19 April.

http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-04/19/c_135294307.htm (accessed 20 April 2016)

hidden clause in Xi's speech, that criticism towards the party or the government should be 'well-meant'.⁴⁶ Xi did not elaborate on what constitutes 'well-meant,' and who decides if the criticism is 'well-meant' or not.

One could argue that the CCP was merely paying lip service. Nevertheless, at least it acknowledged the importance of online public opinion. Given this new development, propaganda strategies also need to adapt and change from the traditional sense of indoctrination and censorship to adopt more innovative methods. A piece of research on 30 cities in China found considerable popular support for state propaganda (Esarey et al 2017). The authors point out a common view according to which the authorities, rather than citizens, should guide public opinion, thus indicating a considerable dose of trust in the state from the part of the populace. This trust, according to the authors, contributes to the regime's capacity to guide public opinion and helps to explain the persistence of popular support for authoritarian rule.

2.5. From Propaganda to e-governance

In addition to placing more emphasis on guiding online public opinion via persuasion, the Chinese party-state has been advocating the *wangluo wenzheng* initiative. Since *wangluo wenzheng* involves e-consultation, e-participation, and e-scrutiny, it can be understood as a form of e-governance. Before discussing China's e-governance or *wangluo wenzheng* strategies, the follow section will first offer a brief literature review on e-government.⁴⁷

The terms e-government and e-governance can be confusing and are sometimes used interchangeably in scholarship published in both Chinese and English (Bhatnagar 2003, Bovaird 2003, Cai 2012, Finger and Pecoud 2003, Lee-Kelley 2008, Palvia and Sharma 2007, Saxena 2005, Sheridan and Riley 2006, Wang et al 2013, Yang 2014, Zeng et al 2011, Zhao 2004). To clarify this confusion, one should first look at the difference between 'governance' and 'government.' Rosenau (1992: 4) argues that governance is a 'more encompassing phenomenon than government' as it embraces governmental institutions as well as informal, non-governmental mechanisms. Keohane and Nye (2000: 20-21) suggest a similar distinction in that governance consists of the processes and institutions that guide and restrain the collective activities of a group. It is not always carried out by a government, but may also be undertaken by private sectors

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷Further literature review on e-government, e-governance and it's application in China can be found in Chapter three.

and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Governance thus represents the link between government and its wider, political, social, and administrative surroundings (Kettl 2002). In other words, government is the institution, whilst governance is the form of governing which is not necessarily an act of formal government (Saxena 2005: 2).

There has been a rapid development in the study of e-government over the past decade, but the research foci are dispersed, covering public administration, political science, government, library and information studies, and computer science (Heeks and Bailur 2007: 19). However, there is not yet a universally accepted definition of 'e-government' among scholars. Depending on the specific context, the regulatory environment, the dominant group of actors, and the various priorities in governmental strategies, the concept of e-government is not always strictly defined and may contain multiple meanings (Torres et al 2005: 218).

Harris (2000) suggests that e-government is the use of information technologies and web-based communication technologies to enhance and promote efficiency as well as the effectiveness of public sector services. Carter and Bélanger (2005) believe that the role of e-government is to improve government efficiency and services for its citizens, employees, businesses and agencies with the help of information technologies. The United Nations defined e-government as 'the use of ICT [Information and Communications Technology] and its application by the government for the provision of information and public services to the people' (UN 2004). Following the rapid development of the Internet and other information technologies, the United Nations enriched the meaning of e-government ten years later, in 2014, and referred to it as 'the use and application of information technologies in public administration to streamline and integrate workflows and processes, to effectively manage data and information, enhance public service delivery, as well as expand communication channels for engagement and empowerment of people' (UN 2014). Gil-Garcia and Luna-Reyes (2006) suggest that besides providing public services, e-government can also promote democratic values and build a 'knowledge society.' Implementing e-government is one of the latest attempts to utilise technologies in a governmental context to push forward government reform (Bretschneider 2003).

As for e-governance, Bhatnagar (2003: 31) points out that it is a broader concept which includes the use of ICT by the government as well as civil society to advocate the better involvement of the public in the governance of political institutions. e-governance is making good use of technologies in order to improve

governmental relationships and in turn to advance democratic expression, promote economic development and encourage the delivery of public services in an efficient way (Riley 2001: online). Dawes (2008) suggests that e-governance consists of the use of ICT to support public services, government administration, democratic processes, as well as relationships between citizens, civil society, the private sector, and the state. Backus (2001) points out that since e-governance uses electronic means to promote good governance, the objectives of e-governance are similar to the objectives of good governance. As e-governance allows governments to provide online services year round by circumventing the public's need to visit government offices in person, it is considered a leap forward in public management with the potential to transform the relationship between government and citizens in a positive way (Saxena 2005). It is a step that goes beyond the boundary of Internet propaganda, on an axis comprised of censorship, propaganda, and e-governance, from the least to most progressive and citizen-friendly policy outlooks.

On 20 June 2008, Hu Jintao visited the headquarters of the People's Daily, to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the party paper. During his visit, Hu stopped by the People's Daily Online and interacted with netizens via Qiangguo Forum, a very popular web-based discussion forum. 'Hello friends!' was Hu's first online message to netizens waiting on the other side of the line. He then went on to chat with four pre-selected netizens, answering their questions. When asked by one of the netizens if he had ever received comments and suggestions posted by the public on the Internet, he responded 'we pay high attention to suggestions and comments made by netizens... we need to listen to people's opinions and to collect input from the masses when making decisions. The Internet is an important channel to understand public opinion, and to gather pieces of popular wisdom.'⁴⁸ Hu was the first Chinese top leader to interact with the public via the Internet, which can be interpreted as a recognition of the importance given to netizens in shaping public opinion. The People's Daily wrote a commentary titled 'When the general secretary becomes a netizen,' and pointed out that Hu's action was not only an acknowledgement of online public opinion, but also reflects his confidence and courage to 'take people as the most important guiding pole (*yiren weiben*)' in governance.⁴⁹

48 *People's Daily Online*. 2008. 'Hu jintao zongshuji touguo reminwang qiangguo luntan tong wangyou zaixian jiaoliu (General secretary Hu Jintao communicates with netizens via qiangguo forum),' 20 June. <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/7406621.html> (accessed 13 October 2015).

49 *People's Daily Online*. 2008. 'Wangluo wenzheng cu zhongguo minzhu zhengzhi qianxing (wangluo wenzheng pushes forward China's democratic politics)', <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/8198/347799/348114/> (accessed 4 January 2016).

In fact, Hu's visit was considered by many Chinese scholars and media as the beginning of *wangluo wenzheng* (thereafter e-governance), by leading the way of Internet technology advancement to foster better interaction and communication between the state and society.⁵⁰ Since then, the new term 'e-governance,' which can be roughly translated as political participation and consultation via the Internet, started to be used frequently in Chinese media. The People's Daily defines e-governance as 'government utilising the Internet as a tool for propaganda, as well as for understanding public opinion, collecting ideas, and input from the public.'⁵¹ The Guangdong provincial government believes that e-governance refers to 'using the Internet as a platform to collect opinion and wisdom from the grassroots, and to disseminate useful information, including political democracy.'⁵² An op-ed piece on the CCP News Online defines e-governance as 'knowing what the public want and think via the Internet in order to make scientific and democratic decisions.'⁵³

The 17th National Congress of the CCP proposed measures to ensure that people's rights to knowledge, to participate, to express opinion, and to scrutinise are respected. Paying attention to opinions expressed on the Internet and listening to netizens' voices further implements the same idea. The Internet is increasingly becoming a new channel for political participation. Between 2009 and 2011, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao chatted with netizens via the central government portal gov.cn for three consecutive years prior to the annual meetings of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. Questions posted by netizens covered most of the hot topics regarding economic developments and daily life. Commenting on his interaction with netizens, Wen said 'a government for the people should keep in contact with the people. There can be different ways of contacting the people, and using the web to communicate with the public is a very good method.'⁵⁴

Led by central leaders, e-governance has become increasingly common across China. The participation of top officials not only encourages the public to express opinions via the Internet, but also pushes local governments to pay more attention to online public opinion. It is not only top Chinese leaders who

50 See for example Wang Yang. 2014. 'Wangluo wenzheng de chuanbo texing ji xianshi kunjing (Characteristics and limitations of Wangluo wenzheng). *People's Daily Online*. 2 September. <http://media.people.com.cn/n/2014/0902/c388686-25589433.html> (accessed 10 October 2015); Chen and Fan (2013); Diyi zhenglun wang. 'wangluo wenzheng xia de zhengfu juese (The role of the government in the context of wangluo wenzheng)' <http://5icomment.com/zhuanti?id=104> (accessed 13 October 2015).

51 Diyi zhenglun wang. 'wangluo wenzheng xia de zhengfu juese (The role of the government in the context of wangluo wenzheng)' <http://5icomment.com/zhuanti?id=104> (accessed 13 October 2015).

52 Wangluo wenzheng platform. 'What is wangluo wenzheng' <http://wen.oeeee.com/gov/> (accessed 10 October 2015)

53 CCP News. 2011. 'Dui wangluo wenzheng gainian ji qi tezhen de zai renshi (Recognition of the concept and characteristics of wangluo wenzheng),' 18 October. <http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/40537/15936063.html> (accessed 10 October 2015).

54 Xinhua Net. 2009. 'Wen jiabao zongli 28ri zaixian fangwan (Premier Wen Jiabao live chat with netizens)', 28 February. http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2009-02/28/content_1246548.htm (accessed 13 January 2016).

expressed their willingness to collect public views via the Internet, but many local officials also made an effort to follow suit. As early as 2011, 47 provincial governors and party secretaries had answered enquiries posted by netizens, and 15 provinces and municipal governments established formal mechanisms to reply to netizens' messages and to standardise channels for e-governance.⁵⁵

Indeed, as early as 2006, the former party secretary of Hunan province, Zhang Chunxian, became the first provincial leader to receive suggestions via the Internet prior to the CCP congress in Hunan. After being appointed as party secretary of Xinjiang, Zhang opened an official Weibo account to interact with netizens, the highest ranking official to do so via Weibo.⁵⁶ In Guangdong province, the party secretary Wang Yang met netizens every year during his five years' term in the province. In 2009, Wang, along with top provincial officials, invited 12 online opinion leaders for a face to face meeting, not only to listen to suggestions, but also to encourage them to criticise the government's shortcomings. In the meantime, Wang published an article in *Qiushi*, the party theory magazine, arguing that the launch of a web video channel for petitions and advocating e-governance are effective ways to promote the rule of law.⁵⁷

It is worth noting that both Zhang and Wang were later promoted to become members of the CCP Politburo, the most powerful political body in China, under Xi's leadership. Wang was also appointed as Vice Premier, while Zhang was put in charge of Xinjiang, the autonomous region affected by the Uyghur independence movement. Given the complexity of Chinese politics, it is difficult to establish a correlation between the attention that the two party members paid to e-governance in their governance, and their subsequent promotions. The high profile campaigns that they coordinated to side with netizens attracted wide media coverage which certainly helped to improve their image, regardless of whether the motive came from their conviction or merely as a political gesture. In the meantime, netizens enjoyed unprecedented access to senior officials, in a show of benefits on both sides.

In a nationwide survey conducted by the People's Daily in relation to the public's attitude towards e-governance, 69% of netizens declared that they see it as an effective means for the party and government officials to understand public opinion. 69% worry that expressing opinion on the Internet may

55 Xinhua Net. 2011. '47 wei shuji shengzhang huiying wangyou liuyan (47 provincial governors and party secretaries answered enquiries posted by netizens)', 24 February. http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2011-02/24/c_121116269.htm (accessed 18 September 2015).

56 *The PLA Daily*. 2011. 'Zhang chunxian kaitong weibo yinqi zhuipeng (Zhang chunxian opens weibo account and attracts followers)', 16 March. <http://news.hunantv.com/x/f/20110316/365326.html> (accessed 13 January 2016).

57 *Southern Daily*. 2011. 'Wang yang sinian sihui wangmin (Wang yang met netizens four times in four years)', 5 July. <http://news.cntv.cn/map/20110705/105426.shtml> (accessed 13 January 2016).

put them in danger.⁵⁸ Another survey carried out by a think tank of the Guangdong provincial government found that 83% of netizens support the advocacy of e-governance. When asked if they believe that issues posted on the Internet can be solved, over 70% answered with 'No' or 'Not sure.' Nevertheless, 69% are confident that e-governance will become a norm for the party-state to engage with the masses.⁵⁹ These results indicate that although the public are skeptical about the effectiveness of e-governance, they hold high hopes that this new way of e-participation and interaction with the government will favour all parties involved.

The functions of e-governance include an acknowledgment of netizens' requests, the publication of actions taken or planned, asking for netizens' opinion on major policies, and the dissolution of social discontent (Chen and Fan 2013). According to the United Nations E-Government Survey, China was ranked 22nd in the world in e-participation in 2016.⁶⁰ A case of public consultation on environmental issues, managed by the country's Ministry of Environmental Protection, has been singled out by the United Nations as a good example.⁶¹ Meanwhile, Luoyang in Henan province also set an example in consulting netizens' opinion. A netizen who constantly posted comments related to daily issues that most concerned the public was elected as representative of Luoyang People's Congress, the very first netizen to become a People's Congress representative in Chinese history. Later on, a few other netizens were elected members of the Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in Luoyang, Henan province. Although these cases in Luoyang were not common across China, it was unimaginable prior to the Internet age that citizens could be elected as representatives or members of CPPCC for sending suggestions to the government.

The Chinese party-state acknowledges that social media have increasingly become the major platforms where public incidents are exposed, thus rendering traditional methods of public opinion guidance ineffective.⁶² In order to further strengthen the capability to shape public opinion, the State Council Information Office urges practitioners to 'proactively and progressively' utilise e-government, including government websites, message boards, government Weibo and Wechat accounts, as well as Internet

58 *People's Daily Online*. 2009. 'Renminwang wangluo wenzheng diaocha xianshi 7cheng wangyou renke wangluo jiandu (People's Daily survey on wangluo wenzheng suggests that 70% of netizens welcome monitoring by the government via the Internet)', 7 July. <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1026/9603337.html> (accessed 18 September 2015).

59 Oeeee.com. 2014. 'Wangluo wenzheng wangyou wenjuan diaocha (A netizen survey regarding wangluo wenzheng)'. <http://wen.oeeee.com/wlwzdc/> (accessed 13 January 2016).

60 UN E-Government Survey 2016, <http://workspace.unpan.org/> (accessed 6 July 2017)

61 Ibid.

62 State Council Information Office. 2014. 'Wangluo yulun gaibian meiti chuanbo geju (Internet public opinion changes media environment)', 24 March. <http://www.scio.gov.cn/zhzc/9/5/1/2014/30079/Document/1367226/1367226.htm> (accessed 8 August 2015).

commentators to disseminate information and to communicate with netizens.⁶³ My interviews with government officials also indicated a change in perception regarding the relationship between the Internet and public opinion. Nanhai government in Guangdong province has been the leading local government to promote *wanluo wenzheng*, which includes e-governance, participation, and e-scrutiny.⁶⁴ An official from the Nanhai Propaganda Department acknowledged that the Internet has made society more vibrant and innovative, and that the government cannot disregard this but instead should keep an open mind and encourage its further development.⁶⁵ The same official also admitted that the government's response was partly due to pressure from online public opinion: 'while on the one hand attempting to guide the public, we also need to follow the flow of public opinion in some cases.'⁶⁶ Guangdong province, which shares a boarder with Hong Kong, has always been more liberal than many other provinces in China. It was intriguing to see the Bureau for Letters and Calls, the department responsible for dealing with petitions, also appreciating the positive potential of the Internet.

An official and a researcher from the Bureau for Letters and Calls of Beijing Municipal Government told me that the bureau recognised the significance of the Internet as a new platform in advancing their work. Therefore, the staff have been adjusting their concepts in accordance with the development of the Internet.⁶⁷ They piloted an e-petition scheme across China since 2007, which encouraged top officials in local governments to answer petitions via online mailboxes. Since many of the cases or grievances filed by the public involve sensitive information that could embarrass the state, the channel for e-petitions has been limited to an online mailbox, a one-way channel, instead of online message boards or Weibo, where messages are made public. Some local bureaus have seen an increase in the number of cases filed via e-petition and a decrease in the number of cases filed through traditional methods. The official I interviewed suggested that e-petition is a 'new window' for the party-state to understand public opinion, or a feedback mechanism.⁶⁸ Having said this, the extent to which online petitions can reduce the figure of physical mass petitions remains to be seen. The number of cases reported via the Internet and solved thereafter is unknown. Nonetheless, the Internet offers a new platform, an alternative option to file one's grievances.

63 Ibid.

64 *The Southern Daily*. 2013. 'Nanhai wangluo wenzheng cheng quansheng xingzheng gaige dianfan (Nanhai wangluo wenzheng is the model for administrative reform in the province)', 20 August. http://epaper.southcn.com/nfdaily/html/2013-08/20/content_7218078.htm (accessed 8 August 2015).

65 Interview with official A, Nanhai Propaganda Department, Guangdong province. Foshan, July/ August 2015.

66 Ibid.

67 Interviews with official A and researcher B, Bureau for Letters and Calls of Beijing Municipal Government and CCP Beijing Committee. Beijing, August 2015.

68 Ibid.

Since Hu Jintao's first interaction with netizens via a popular online forum of the People's Daily in 2008, the channels and methods for e-governance have been expanding widely. According to a survey carried by the People's Daily, responding to posts left by netizens on message boards and forums is the most welcomed form of e-governance at the grassroots.⁶⁹ Commenting on the launch of the Message Board for the Premier, the CCP News Online argue that through the institutionalisation of interactions between the government and netizens, and by formalising the collection of public suggestions, a new style of e-governance is established.⁷⁰ The director of the Public Opinion Monitoring Office at the People's Daily Online, Zhu Xinhua, believes that government message boards provide a direct channel between netizens and the government to ensure that the voices of the people can be heard, and that demands from the grassroots can be met, subsequently easing societal tensions.⁷¹ Zhu Xinhua also pointed out that message boards cultivate in netizens a habit of participation and of making constructive suggestions to the government.⁷² The Sichuan provincial government urges its officials to handle messages left by netizens on the Message Board for Local Leaders (MBLL), turning the Board into an opportunity to foster closer relationships with the public, and a way to propagate government policy.⁷³

The implementation of online message boards has been institutionalised and remains active. In September 2017, the CCP hosted a conference regarding how to handle messages left by Internet users, the ninth such annual conference held to date. Since the launch of the MBLL in 2006, the platform has attracted over one million participating netizens and seen eight hundred thousand issues solved.⁷⁴ For example, at the end of August 2017, the message board of the party secretary of Beijing had received over 1,500 messages. An average of 10 messages every day, including complaints and enquiries, were posted on his board. In the meantime, two to three cases were solved every day, with the result posted under the original message.⁷⁵ An examination of messages left on MBLL across all provinces found that, although top officials of the province seem to be actively responding to the public, officials at the lower

69 *People's Daily Online*. 2009. 'Renminwang wangluo wenzheng diaocha xianshi 7cheng wangyou renke wangluo jiandu (People's Daily survey on wangluo wenzheng suggests that 70% of netizens welcome monitoring by the government via the Internet),' 7 July. <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1026/9603337.html> (accessed 18 September 2015).

70 CCP News. 2014. 'Zongli liuyanban yinlin wangluo wenzheng xin changtai (Message Board for the Premier leads a new way for wangluo wenzheng),' 2 September. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/pinglun/n/2014/0902/c241220-25589671.html> (accessed 20 September 2015).

71 Southern Media. 2014. 'Zhu Xinhua: liangge yulunchang de rongtong zhidao (Zhu Xinhua: connecting two public opinion fields).' Nanfang Chuanmei Yanjiu (38). 25 July. http://www.nfmedia.com/cmzj/cmyj/jdzt/201212/t20121204_358647.htm (accessed 26 July 2014).

72 Ibid.

73 *People's Daily Online*. 2015. 'Gedi lingdao zhongshi wangmin husheng (Local leaders listen to the netizens),' 12 January. <http://leaders.people.com.cn/n/2015/0112/index.html>.

74 *People's Daily Online*. 2017. '2017 renminwang wangmin liuyan banli gongzuo huiyi zai liaoning shenyang zhaokai (Conference on 2017 People's Daily Message Board holds in shenyang, liaoning),' 14 September. <http://leaders.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0914/c58278-29534932.html> (accessed 15 September 2017)

75 Message Board for Local Leaders (Beijing), <http://liuyan.people.com.cn/threads/list?fid=539#state=4> (accessed 15 August 2017)

levels are far less keen to do so. For instance, the Suzhou municipal government in Zhejiang province received 226 messages, but replied to none.⁷⁶

This significantly different treatment of MBLL suggests that regardless of the boost in importance by the state media, the true effectiveness of this policy is down to individual officials.⁷⁷ As the United Nations points out in its E-government Survey, 'e-participation highly depends on strong political commitment, collaborative leadership, vision and appropriate institutional frameworks'.⁷⁸

In my thesis, I suggest that government Weibo, government online message boards, and e-government are all part of an e-governance initiative that is structured to foster better interaction between the state and society, serving as platforms for netizens to express their opinions, make suggestions, file their complaints, or expose government wrongdoing. On the policy supply side, the state provides e-services, directs public opinions, and feeds pro-government information via the same websites. They will be examined in detail in the three empirical chapters on government Weibo, government online message boards, and e-government.

2.6. Building an Internet Power

The promotion of e-governance shows that the Chinese party-state's treatment of the Internet has moved past propaganda and that there is political intention to use new media in innovative ways. It shows the authorities' capability of adapt and change in accordance with the ICT development in order to stay in power. In 2010, the authorities published a White paper on the Internet in China which emphasised the importance of the Internet to the country's economy, state security, 'social harmony' as well as state sovereignty.⁷⁹ Although the innovative Internet strategies implemented by the CCP were conceived during the period of former leaders Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, it was after Xi Jinping took control of major leadership posts in 2012 that Internet initiatives were further expanded. The idea of treating the Internet not only as a tool for propaganda, but also one to promote e-governance only emerged in the past few

76 Message Board for Local Leaders (Zhejiang), <http://liuyan.people.com.cn/threads/list?fid=539#state=4> (accessed 15 August 2017)

77 Please see the chapter on online message boards for further discussion.

78 UN E-Government Survey 2016, <http://workspace.unpan.org/> (accessed 6 July 2017)

79 China Daily. 2010. 'White paper on the Internet in China', 8 June. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-06/08/content_9950198.htm (accessed 20 January 2017)

years. One of Xi's new approaches was to reshuffle departments dealing with Internet policies. For years, several government departments and CCP institutions responsible for regulating traditional media also enjoyed jurisdictions over the Internet. They included the CCP's Propaganda Department, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), the General Administration of Press and Publication, the Ministry of Culture, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), and the Internet Affairs Bureau of the State Council Information Office (SCIO). The SCIO is also the CCP's External Propaganda Department, one of the bodies called 'one administration with two brands,' a typical Chinese party-state institution.

With so many regulators, it is unclear who is in charge of the generation and enforcement of Internet regulations. In May 2011, the SCIO announced the transfer of its Internet Affairs Bureau to a new subordinate agency, called the State Internet Information Office (SIIO). The newly formed SIIO had a wide range of responsibilities, such as direct 'online content management,' or the supervision of online publications; overseeing online government propaganda; investigating and punishing violators of online content rules; and overseeing i) the telecommunication giants that provide Internet access to users, and ii) content providers. Two former SCIO officials were put in charge of the SIIO, in addition to senior officials from the Ministry of Public Security and MIIT.⁸⁰ Two years later, the SIIO was renamed the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC). Upgrading SCIO's Internet Affairs Bureau to an independent office that enjoys the same status as the SCIO indicates that the party-state recognised the societal and legal importance of the Internet. However, the reforms of Internet regulators did not stop with the creation of the SIIO and CAC.

In 2013, the CCP launched a major restructuring of China's Internet policymaking organs, creating a Central Leading Group for Cybersecurity and Informatisation. Led by Xi Jinping, a former Director of the Central Propaganda Department as deputy leader and the head of CAC as Chief of General Office, the group is tasked with developing a broad Internet policy. The purpose is to lead and coordinate Internet security and informatisation strategies among different sectors, and to draft national strategies, development plans, and major policies.⁸¹ Other members of the group include those involved in the set up of, or making amendments to, Internet regulations, such as the current Director of the Propaganda

80 Wines, Michael. 2011. 'China Creates New Agency for Patrolling the Internet', *The New York Times*, 4 May. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/05/world/asia/05china.html> (accessed 8 December 2015).

81 Zhao, Lei and Cao Yin. 2014. 'President Xi vows to boost cybersecurity', *China Daily*, 28 February. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-02/28/content_17311483.htm (accessed 18 December 2015).

Department, the Minister of the MIIT, and the Director of State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, and the Minister of Culture. Traditionally, the person responsible with the CCP's overall propaganda and ideological strategy is the member of the Politburo Standing Committee who serves as Director of the Propaganda Department. The creation of this leading group, with Xi himself as leader, suggests that he pays high attention to the potential of the Internet and most important, wants to be in charge of how it shapes Chinese politics in the future.

Speaking at the inaugural meeting of the newly formed Central Cyber Security and Informatisation Leading Group held in February 2014, President Xi Jinping first introduced the idea of building China into an Internet power (*wangluo qianguo*), and pointed out that Internet security and informatisation are the major strategic issues concerned.⁸² The Chinese government believes that China is far from being an Internet power, due to issues such as 'insufficient intellectual property rights protection' and 'lack of innovative and creative ideas.'⁸³ 'Building an Internet power (*wangluo qianguo*) requires domestically developed solid technology, rich and comprehensive information services, prosperous cyber culture, sound infrastructure, and high-caliber experts in Internet security and information, as well as international cooperation,' Xi emphasises.⁸⁴ He also pointed out that China must innovate and improve its online propaganda efforts, strengthen independent innovation of core technologies, and raise its capacity in terms of information gathering, handling, and dissemination.⁸⁵

Although Xi did not elaborate on what exactly constitutes 'independent innovation of core technologies,' and how the capacity to disseminate information can be enhanced, the maintenance of a search engine not controlled by commercial companies but by the government does meet the state's needs. The deputy director of the State Council's Internet and Information Office pointed out that 'the goal of China is to become an Internet power (*wangluo qianguo*), as well as to provide its people with better Internet technology, in which the search engine is the most important part.'⁸⁶ When it was first coined, the term Internet Power was mentioned only in journals of CCP theory,⁸⁷ but later the concept received significant

82 Xinhua News. 2014. 'Xi heads Internet security group.' 27 February. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-02/27/c_133148418.htm (accessed 28 December 2015).

83 Liu Quan. 2015. 'An Internet power in the making', *China Daily*. 16 December. http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2015-12/16/content_22726745.htm (accessed 18 December 2015)

84 *China Daily*. 2015. 'President Xi Jinping's views on the Internet', 14 December. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-12/14/content_22706973.htm (accessed 18 December 2015).

85 Xinhua News. 2014. 'Zhongyang wangluo anquan he xinixhua lingdao xiaozu chengli (The establishment of the Central Internet Security and Informatisation Leading Group),' 27 February. http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-02/27/c_119538719.htm (accessed 29 December 2015).

86 *People's Daily Online*. 2014. 'Zhongguo sousuo yu baidu zhenlu hezuo (China search signs strategic partnership with baidu).' 27 January. <http://media.people.com.cn/n/2014/1127/c40606-26101601.html>

87 Livingston, Scott D. 2016. 'Assessing China's Plan to Build Internet Power', China File, January 7. <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/media/assessing-chinas-plan-build-Internet-power> (accessed 13 January 2016).

attention in Chinese media following its insertion into the '2015 Guidelines for the 13th Five Year Plan' and into Xi's keynote speech at the second World Internet Congress in Wuzhen, China.

The proposal to focus on Internet power signaled a new, high-level prioritisation of the Internet as a major strategic initiative with economic, military, and political implications. In pursuing Internet power, Chinese authorities hope to overcome two challenges. The first is the potential of the Internet to act as a platform for subversive influences, overseas and domestic, that challenge the CCP's legitimacy. The second is the highly dependence on western, US in particular, technologies and software, which China considers a security threat. It suggests that the party-state is no longer just reactive to the potential threat of the Internet, but also attempts to use it for its own economic and political needs.

2.7. Cyber Sovereignty

In recent years, the party-state has repeatedly raised the issue of cyber sovereignty (*wangluo zhuquan*), starting with the 2010 White Paper on the Internet in China for instance. Transforming China into an Internet power (*wangluo qiangguo*), advocated by the current leader Xi, further suggests that the party-state sees the potential of the Internet in the greater plan to safeguard China's version of cyber sovereignty, which believes that a sovereign state has the right to 'independently choose how they will tread the path of cyber development, as well as issue their own regulations and public policies.'⁸⁸ This sovereignty-based approach to governing the Internet has been criticised by some observers as an attempt to maintain control over the uncontrollable cyberspace (Livingston 2016). In fact, it demonstrates the CCP's resilient authoritarianism—highly adaptive in turning a potential threat to its advantage in order to survive.

The party-state considers the Internet as a conglomeration of communication tools between (offline) people and entities (Herold 2016). Any form of online interaction or transmission of data in China, in the eyes of the authorities, becomes the action of a person or entity under the sovereign rule of the party-state, and is thus subject to the strict regulations and laws of China. As the 2010 White Paper on the

88 Xinhua News. 2015. 'Chinese President underscores cyber sovereignty, rejects Internet hegemony.' 16 December. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-12/16/c_134922689.htm (accessed 17 December 2015).

Internet in China declared, the government will 'constantly adjust relevant Internet policies to better match the law' and to create a 'healthy and harmonious' Internet environment.⁸⁹

Addressing the second World Internet Conference held in China in December 2015, Xi argued that sovereign equality should also be applicable to cyberspace.⁹⁰ Promoting greater cyber autonomy is not a new concept for Xi. He previously raised it during his visit to Brazil in 2014, when he declared that 'in the world today, the Internet raises new challenges for national autonomy, security and development. In the information sphere, there are no double standards, and every country [has the right] to defend its own information security.'⁹¹ Although Xi stopped short of pointing out which country uses 'double standards' in Internet governance parlance, Chinese state media hints that it is in fact the United States. Ironically, while Xi accuses others of applying double standards, the party-state itself applies the same tactics in violation of cyberspace prima facie rules—blaming the US and turning a blind eye to its own actions.

A commentary published by the Xinhua News Agency argued that cyber sovereignty is critical to national sovereignty, and no surveillance or hacking against any sovereign nation should be tolerated.⁹² It then went on to cite the U.S National Security Agency's PRISM surveillance program as an example, and blamed it for trying to build a cyberspace governance system that is 'far from being fair and just.'⁹³ At a meeting with tech executives at the US-China Internet Industry Forum in Seattle during Xi's official visit to the US in 2015, he proposed that all the countries should establish their own Internet policy in line with their own national conditions in order to build a 'peaceful, secure, open, and cooperative cyber space.'⁹⁵ It is clear that China has the U.S in mind when arguing for the necessity to defend its cyber sovereignty. Meanwhile, for years, the Chinese government has been accused of supporting massive cyber assaults on all sectors of the U.S economy, including major firms like Google and Lockheed Martin, as well as the U.S. government and military (Windrem 2015). Clearly, the party-state wants others to respect its borders

89China Daily. 2010. 'White paper on the Internet in China', 8 June. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-06/08/content_9950198.htm (accessed 20 January 2017)

90 BBC News. 2015. 'China Internet: Xi Jinping calls for 'cyber sovereignty.' 16 December. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-35109453> (accessed 16 December 2015).

91 Bandurski, David. 2015. 'How Xi Jinping sees the Internet', 9 December. China Media Project. <http://cmp.hku.hk/2015/12/09/39451/> (accessed 10 December 2015).

92 Xinhua News. 2015. 'China Voice: Why does cyber-sovereignty matter?' 16 December. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-12/16/c_134923936.htm (accessed 17 December 2015).

93 Xinhua News. 2015. 'China Voice: Why does cyber-sovereignty matter?' 16 December. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-12/16/c_134923936.htm (accessed 17 December 2015).

94Ibid.

95 *China Daily*. 2015. 'President Xi Jinping's views on the Internet', 14 December. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-12/14/content_22706973_2.htm (accessed 17 December 2015).

on the Internet, while allowing itself to conduct cyber espionage against other states. In addition to setting up its own definition of how to protect cyber sovereignty, the CCP also advocates the establishment of a new global Internet governance system that counter-balances the domination of the U.S.

Accordingly, the Chinese authorities promote the reform of international Internet governance into a system that features a multilateral approach, with multi-party participation rather than 'one party calling the shots.'⁹⁶ The CCP considers the American cyberspace governance system as 'global unilateralism' since it enjoys an advantage in influencing ideas of Internet governance, and its view often overlooks the interests of developing countries.⁹⁷ In the early years of the Internet adoption in China, U.S Internet giants such as Yahoo, Google, Facebook, and Youtube were able to operate in the country. However, they were eventually forced out or banned. Dismissing criticism from the West, Chinese officials maintain that the banning of select Western media and tech firms in China was because they were 'not willing to abide by Chinese laws.'⁹⁸ An editorial piece written by the state-owned Xinhua News Agency singled out Google's withdrawal from the Chinese market as a negative example, and accused the company of violating a 'written promise made when entering the Chinese market by not filtering its search services.'⁹⁹ Under the banner of cyber sovereignty, China attempts to build an Internet with borders rather than a global one. Forcing out Western search engines such as Google and launching Chinese state-sponsored search engines is one of the ways to defend China's cyber sovereignty. As this thesis will demonstrate in the chapter on state-sponsored search engines, although Baidu, the commercial search engine giant, has already filtered search results, the CCP attempts to further disseminate state-approved information through its own search engine.

The party-state's desire to become an Internet power also has a significant economic element. As China seeks to transition its economy away from investment-led growth toward growth fueled by consumption (Livingston 2016), the authorities have recognized that Internet power may lead to ensuring sustained economic growth and national prestige. Using the Internet to advance China's social and economic development is another example which suggests that the party-state sees beyond propaganda and tries to fully utilise the potential of this technology.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid.

98 China.org. 2015. 'China Voice: Cyber sovereignty taboo should end.' 17 December. http://www.china.org.cn/china/Off_the_Wire/2015-12/17/content_37342782.htm (accessed 17 December 2015).

99 Xinhua News. 2015. 'China Voice: Cyber sovereignty taboo should end.' 17 December. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-12/17/c_134927991.htm (accessed 18 December 2015).

2.8. Conclusion

The theory of resilient authoritarianism shows that China's political system is capable of enhancing the state's capacity via institutional adaptations and policy adjustments. This chapter demonstrates the authorities' evolving understanding of propaganda methods and the potential of the Internet. It suggests that the CCP's strategies on the Internet keep evolving, in other words they are adaptive. The approach is not monolithic, but sophisticated.

In addition to placing emphasis on guiding online public opinion, the party-state has also started to advocate e-governance initiatives after Hu Jintao's interaction with netizens via Qiangguo Forum at the People's Daily Online in 2008. As Weibo became increasingly popular since its creation in 2009, the party-state extended their attention to social media. In a document passed in 2011, the CCP not only reiterated the importance of online public opinion guidance, but also mentioned the strengthening of social media opinion guidance as a top priority.¹⁰⁰ In order to further strengthen the capacity to shape public opinion, the State Council Information Office urges practitioners to 'proactively and progressively' utilise e-government, including government websites, message boards, government Weibo and Wechat accounts, as well as Internet commentators to disseminate information and to communicate with netizens.¹⁰¹

Although the innovative Internet strategies implemented by the CCP started during the period of former leaders Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, it was after Xi Jinping took control of major leadership posts in 2012 that Internet initiatives were further expanded. The idea of treating the Internet not only as a tool for propaganda, but also to promote e-governance only emerged in the past few years, partly due to the rapid development of Internet technologies including high speed broadband and smartphones. From indoctrination to public opinion guidance, from censorship to e-governance, the party-state's strategies on the Internet keep evolving in accordance to the changing environment of the cyberspace.

Increasing Internet power is a multifaceted strategy that is designed to deliver significant state support to the country's domestic technology industry, while also seeking to influence global Internet governance

100 China News Agency, 'Zhongyang tichu jiaqiang wangluo wenhua guanli (The Central Committee advocates the strengthening of Internet culture management),' 25 October. <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2011/10-25/3414069.shtml> (accessed 10 June 2015)

101 State Council Information Office. 2014. 'Wangluo yulun gaibian meiti chuanbo geju (Internet public opinion changes media environment),' 24 March. <http://www.scio.gov.cn/zhzc/9/5/1/2014/30079/Document/1367226/1367226.htm> (accessed 8 August 2015).

and opinion. The extent to which its target can be achieved relies on the successful implementation of its supporting policies. The inclusion of Internet power in the 13th Five Year Plan indicates the authorities' recognition of the significance of the Internet in advancing domestic innovation and transforming China's Internet economy into a world leader. Building Internet power involves safeguarding cyber sovereignty. The party-state argues that a country's sovereignty on the cyberspace should be respected in the same ways as in the actual world. In other words, non-interference in a sovereign state's domestic affairs is advocated. Indeed, the same argument can be found in the CCP's rejection of critics who point to the regime's human rights record. According to Chinese authorities' logic, they have the virtually exclusive rights to manage online activities in China. By defending cyber sovereignty with such an approach, the Chinese government party-state hopes to legitimise its control over the Internet and society, both online and offline.

The combination of pursuing Internet power and defending its sovereignty on the Internet can be seen as an effort to achieve 'self-reliance' by forcing out western players while promoting China's own commercial and state players. The same rationale is behind the upgrading of the Great Firewall which prevents netizens from seeking sensitive information outside China, and which also keeps outsiders from violating the country's cyber sovereignty. In a complex strategy, the party-state attempts at the same time to construct an online eco-system that can sustain western influence and advance economic and social development. In the following five empirical chapters, I will examine in detail each of these approaches in order to offer a new dimension in understanding China's adaptive, innovative and sophisticated Internet strategies.

3. ***Chapter Three: Internet Commentators***

3.1. Introduction

Nathan (2003) identifies input institutions as an important source of authoritarian resilience. China's censorship apparatus can be seen as one of the country's input institutions (King et al 2013). The conventional method of handling undesirable information posted on online forums is to delete or block them. In the era of 'authoritarian resilience 2.0', the party-state introduced Internet commentators, along with state-sponsored search engines, to go beyond old-fashion censorship with the aim to feed with pro-government information and to direct online public opinion in its favour. By examining how the party-state deploys Internet commentators as an adaptive method—or by manipulating online opinion without resorting to censorship, this chapter may shed light on the understanding of the regime's institutionalisation and longevity.

As discussed in the previous chapter, public opinion played a less significant role prior to the arrival of the Internet. The CCP has learned to adapt its position in the face of the growing influence of public opinion on social media, especially in the beginning of the 21st century. When controversial events enjoy the support of online public opinion but are non-threatening to the survival of the central government, the Chinese party-state accommodates the wishes of the public (Han 2015; Hassid 2015; King et al 2013, 2014 and 2017). By doing so, the party-state hopes to show that it is willing to listen to the people's voice and therefore seeks to cultivate a positive image.

The CCP has thus been keen to embrace information and communication technologies to serve its needs. It not only imposes strict censorship on the cyberspace, but also makes good use of Internet technologies. I have identified five adaptive propaganda strategies on the Internet: deploying Internet commentators, setting up Weibo accounts, promoting e-government, introducing online message boards, and launching state-sponsored search engines. Using Internet commentators to sway public opinion in the cyberspace is among the earliest adaptive Internet propaganda strategies introduced by the party-state which is in line with the ICT development.

In the early days of Chinese social media, Bulletin Boards System (BBS) and online forums were the most popular Internet platforms for netizens. Those young and vibrant Internet users gathered at online communities to exchange ideas and information, and to express their opinions on social issues and political situations. As China's netizen numbers grow rapidly, BBS and online forums have increasingly become a magnet for online public opinion that are beyond the reach of state media. Given the nature and scale of social media, it is virtually impossible to censor every online message in real time. Instead of blocking everything, the CCP tries to tame online public opinion by inserting its messages and ideas into the cyberspace.

In fact, the Russian government has also been deploying a 'troll army' to spread pro-Kremlin information to domestic audiences as well as to international audiences. The 'troll army' in Russia were offered a full-time job with a monthly salary, while Internet commentators in China are allegedly paid 50 Chinese cents for every pro-government comment posted on the Internet, and have therefore been nicknamed by Chinese netizens as the '50 Cent Party' (*wu mao dang*). Whoever speaks up for the Chinese party-state to express pro-government views will be labeled as a member of the '50 Cent Party.' In the meantime, a group of non-state Internet commentators has emerged, which consists of ordinary netizens who voluntarily post pro-government messages. Since the volunteers willingly speak up for the government without asking a reward of 50 cents, they are labelled as '*zi gan wu*' (*zidai ganliang de wumao*—50 Cent Party who brings their own dried food). There have been numerous discussions about the identity and structure of China's Internet commentators in recent years.¹⁰² Nonetheless, their origin as a group, structure, composition, and workflow are understudied.¹⁰³

Who are the Internet commentators? What is the structure of the Internet commentator team? Are they literally paid 50 cents as a reward? If not, how much do they actually receive? What is their posting procedure and workflow? Does their strategy work? This chapter will first illustrate the growing significance of online public opinion and its impact on the party-state's decision making, followed by literature review. I will then give a brief historical background of the CCPs propaganda doctrine in order to trace the origins of the idea of influencing public opinion. Three examples will be examined in order to demonstrate the implications of the work done by Internet commentators. This chapter ends with a discussion of the effectiveness and limits of Internet commentators. I suggest that Internet commentators are mostly government or Party officials assigned for the task instead of random netizens. The online public opinion guidance mechanism for Internet commentators is well organized and is employed in various government organizations at different levels.

3.2. Methodology

Although the Chinese party-state never published central guidelines regarding the contribution of Internet commentators, government and party offices at different levels have issued documents concerning the establishment of Internet commentator teams and their training. I have collected government documents, papers, and announcements from Chinese government websites by searching the keywords 'Internet commentators' (*wangluo pinglun yuan*) on search engines Baidu and Google. In order to ensure the authenticity and authoritativeness of those documents, I used only websites whose domain ends with '.gov.cn,' which means that they are official websites of the Chinese government. Over one hundred

¹⁰²See for example, Watts, Jonathan. 2005. 'China's secret internet police target critics with web of propaganda'. *The Guardian*, (14 June). <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2005/jun/14/newmedia.china> (accessed 15 January 2012); Bristow, Michael. 2008. 'China's internet 'spin doctors''. BBC News. (16 December). <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/7783640.stm> (accessed 15 November 2014); Haley, Usha. 2010. 'China's Fifty Cent Party for Internet Propaganda'. *The Huffington Post*. (4 October). http://www.huffingtonpost.com/usha-haley/chinas-fifty-cent-party-f_1_b_749989.html (accessed 15 January 2012); Cook, Sarah. 2011. 'China's growing army of paid internet commentators'. Freedom House. (11 October). <http://blog.freedomhouse.org/weblog/2011/10/chinas-growing-army-of-paid-internet-commentators.html> (accessed 15 November 2014); <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7783640.stm> (accessed 15 November 2014); Yu, Xin. .2011. 'China's Online Propagandists Revealed'. Radio Free Asia. (9 December). <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/online-12092011145353.html> (accessed 15 November 2014)

¹⁰³Han 2015 and King et al 2017 published their findings on the Internet commentator after I finished my research for this chapter.

official documents were used for this study. Prior to the the Internet age, such documents would have been classified, and would have therefore been off limits to researchers. Partly thanks to the Online Government Project, that advocates government transparency, many of the documents can now be openly accessed. They not only provide a solid proof of the existence of government Internet commentators, but also allow me to gain an insight into their structure and work flow.

For the three examples of Internet commentators examined as case studies in this chapter, I have conducted content analysis on Tianya forum and Sina News, and logged on to Sina Weibo and Facebook in order to study the suspected Internet commentators' accounts. I attempted to approach government Internet commentators for interviews during my fieldwork trip to China in the summer of 2014. Two potential interviewees were identified, and both declined my request due to the sensitivity of the topic. The views and opinions of Internet commentators used in this chapter were collected from media reports.

3.3. The Development of the Use of Internet Commentators

Given the nature of cyberspace, the Chinese party-state can no longer exert full control over information on the Internet. As analysed in the previous chapter, Internet technology has changed the direction of information flows—communication in cyberspace is more dynamic and interactive—which brings unprecedented challenges to the authoritarian state. Although backing down in order to accommodate public opinion in some cases may satisfy the population, and hence, improve the authorities' image and consolidate their legitimacy, the CCP was forced to respond passively. More proactive and innovative propaganda strategies to channel information and direct public opinion have to be adopted. In addition to the traditional methods that involve blocking, deleting, and censoring, the authorities introduced the use of Internet commentators as a mechanism to proactively sway public opinion in favor of the government.

The Chinese government is not the only one to deploy Internet commentators to manipulate public opinion. Russia has also been advocating similar practice. An institution called the Agency for Internet Studies, located in St. Petersburg, is responsible for producing and disseminating pro-Kremlin materials on the Internet. Although the Kremlin denied all knowledge of the operation, rumours of state-sponsored Internet commentators have been circulating in Russia, and intensified after the military conflicts between Russia and Ukraine in 2014. Russian Internet commentators were attempting to direct public opinion regarding the conflict in Kremlin's favour through social media and comments on Western media websites. Employees of that agency were asked to target Western figures such as the U.S. President Obama, Europe, or Ukraine, and ordered to celebrate Russian President Vladimir Putin and the defense minister Sergey Shoygu.¹⁰⁴ Named Russia's 'troll army,' they insert patriotic sentiments into blog posts about beauty tips, fishing, fortune-telling, or photography.¹⁰⁵

Pro-Russian government Internet commentators are part of a growing industry offering hundreds of young

¹⁰⁴Virginia Harrison and Alla Eshchenko. 2016. 'Inside Russia's pro-Putin troll factory,' CNN, 3 September. <http://money.cnn.com/2015/09/03/news/russia-troll-factory-putin/> (accessed 15 September 2015)

¹⁰⁵Alec Luhn. 2015. 'Game of trolls: the hip digi-kids helping Putin's fight for online supremacy,' The Guardian, 18 August. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/18/trolls-putin-russia-savchuk> (accessed 15 September 2015)

Russians about £600 a month, in addition to bonuses, and a two-days on, two-days off work schedule.¹⁰⁶ It was reported that the Russian government was spending millions of dollars to pay English-speaking Russians to promote Putin and his policies in U.S. media outlets including Fox News and *The Huffington Post*. Russia's Internet commentators are expected to manage multiple fake accounts and post on news articles 50 times a day, often with sentiments as simplistic as 'Putin makes Obama look stupid and weak!'¹⁰⁷ While the Russians have a single organisation dedicated to the job, China's Internet commentators are spread out widely in government departments.

3.4. Literature Review

Although scholars acknowledged that the CCP employs Internet commentators as one of its propaganda strategies, a systemic study of Internet commentators is largely absent in the literature in the early years of the 21st century. Yang (2009: 51) dedicated one paragraph to this topic, which states that Internet commentators were 'hired as volunteers or paid staff' and 'covertly guide' the direction of online public opinion. Yang's (2014) later work suggests that those commentators are employees or volunteers recruited by the party-state to calm down anti-party sentiment and push forward government agenda. Sullivan (2013: 778) describes Internet commentators as 'Party-paid opinion guiders' who are also known as the '50 cent party'. Gordon (2013: 58) attempts to examine the motives behind Chinese Internet censorship as well as the potential impact on the Chinese people, and quotes Yang's above work to define the job of 'Internet commentators' as 'guide the direction of the debates in accordance with the principles laid down by the propaganda departments of the party' without giving his own definition. When discussing the origin of the term 'fifty-cent party,' Gordon again quoted the same page from Yang, saying that rumors has it that the party-state pays these commentators 50 cents for every pro-government post. The authors suggest that the term '50 cent party' was the invention of Chinese Internet users who believe that commentators were paid 50 cents for every post favorable toward the government on online forums and bulletin boards (BBS). Marquis and Yang (2014) argue that the term '50 cent party' originates from Hunan government in central China, was first used in 2004, and confirm that Internet commentators are paid fifty cents per post.

As regards the motivation behind setting up an Internet commentator mechanism, Mou *et. al.* (2011) point out that the existence of Internet commentators is a result of the authoritarian social system of China which indicates an alternative way of direct censorship. In the absence of evidence, Mou *et. al.* also suggest that there are 280,000 to 300,000 Internet commentators in China. Yang (2014: 116) considers that the deployment of Internet commentators across China, including to local governments, is a 'hidden form of control.' Marquis and Yang (2014: online) grouped 'Internet water army' and '50 cent party,' in addition to celebrity Sina Weibo users, known as 'Big V,' into strategies to shape public opinion. Abbott (2013: 586) argues that using Internet commentators to neutralise undesirable public opinion and disseminate pro-government comments indicates a change of methods, 'from information control to information management; from simple repression and propaganda to an increased use of spin.'

¹⁰⁶Alec Luhn. 2015. 'Game of trolls: the hip digi-kids helping Putin's fight for online supremacy,' *The Guardian*, 18 August. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/18/trolls-putin-russia-savchuk> (accessed 15 September 2015)

¹⁰⁷Max Seddon. 2014. 'Documents Show How Russia's Troll Army Hit America,' *BuzzFeed News*, 2 June.

<http://www.buzzfeed.com/maxseddon/documents-show-how-russias-troll-army-hit-america#qczvrkbz8o> (accessed 15 August 2015)

The above publications and journal articles do not specifically address the issue of Internet commentators, rather, briefly touch the topic with little solid evidence to support their claims. Hung (2010) is among a handful of journal articles that made Internet commentators as the main subject of their study. He argues that by embracing the new information age and by implementing the use of Internet commentators, the CCP's propaganda mechanism has been strengthened. Hung suggests that Internet commentators, most of them recruited from various police departments, propaganda, and publicity agencies, and the Communist Youth League of China, are the symbol of the party-state's 'new politically adept and proactive web-oriented approach' (Hung 2010: 157). The author also took it for granted that the reason they are known as the '50 Cent Party' is because they are paid 50 Chinese cents per message they post online. Two news reports, by China's state news agency, Xinhua and Voice of America were used as supporting evidence of the employment of Internet commentators but the reports fell short of proving the author's claim that they are 'covertly enlisted' from politically reliable party members and public servants.

Whereas Internet commentators as the subject of studies has been largely overlooked by scholarship, there have been a handful of news reports on the issue. One of the most cited in the literature was Bandurski (2008) who quoted 'an insider' at a major website in China, saying that there are 'a huge number of Fifty Cent Party members spreading messages' on that website and by some estimates, these commentators comprise as many as 280,000 nationwide. Bandurski also suggests, in the same article, that China's Culture Ministry regularly holds training sessions for Internet commentators. It did not further elaborate on who the commentators are. The Guardian, a UK newspaper, reported that Nanjing government hires Internet commentators from the ranks of its existing employees (Watts 2005). Cook (2011) quoted Freedom House and suggests that there are two kinds of state-supported Internet commentators—private citizens paid by the party-state and government employees. Bremmer (2010) considers in *Foreign Affairs* that Internet commentators as a 'low-tech means,' are a 'simple, inexpensive way' for the party-state to disseminate and disguise official views. Similar to academic scholarship, those news articles failed to examine the structure and formation of Internet commentator teams in detail. The studies of Internet commentators above were mostly non-academic, but based on media accounts, my research will shed light on this overlooked area.

It was not until I completed my data collection and drafted this chapter that new studies on the Internet commentators appeared in the scholarship. Han's (2015a) argument is very close to mine, in which he suggests that the Chinese party-state mobilized its agents to engage anonymously in online discussions and to post pro-government commentary. He points out that the Internet commentator strategy proved ineffective or even counterproductive due to a lack of proper motivation as well as the persistence of old propaganda logic. As for evidence of the existence of government Internet commentators, the author relied on state media reports and leaked government directives available on China Digital Times (CDT) at Berkeley, in other words, secondary sources. My research will fill this gap by relying on primary sources collected from government websites.

In a follow-up article, Han (2015b) studied netizens who identify themselves as the 'voluntary fifty-cent army,' Internet commentators who post pro-government comments free of charge. He argues that given their relatively neutral stance vis-à-vis state propaganda, their advocacy of popular nationalism, emphasis on facts and rationality, and their flexible strategies, the voluntary fifty-cent army are often more effective at influencing online public opinion than state agents. King et al (2017) conducted a large-scale empirical analysis on the operation of Internet commentators and suggest that goal of this mechanism is to distract public opinion and change the subject instead of arguing with skeptics of the party-state or discuss controversial issues. The empirical studies in this chapter regarding the voluntary fifty-cent army in action echoes Han (2015b) and King et al's (2017) observation.

3.5. Identity and Rewards of Internet Commentators

The evidence collected for this chapter provides an insight into the scale of the deployment of Internet commentators by government departments. A list of 283 Internet commentators in Chongqing was exposed by the media in 2010. The list divided commentators into several categories including core Internet commentators, peripheral Internet commentators, inner Internet commentators, temporary Internet commentators, public opinion teams, and key websites.¹⁰⁸ According to this leaked list, Internet commentators come from a wide range of government offices, from village level to municipal level, as well as media outlets, state enterprises, and schools. Government departments on the list include the Environmental Protection Agency, Propaganda Department, Discipline and Inspection Committee, Meteorological Bureau, Government General Office, Organisation Department, and the Bureau of Civil Affairs etc. The list serves as additional evidence showing that the deployment of Internet commentators is a widespread practice adopted by the party-state institutions.

Official documents examined by me suggest that Internet commentators are mostly government employees or party officials who were assigned to the task alongside their routine duty, instead of being drawn from the ranks of citizens. Among sixty-five government documents published by various departments that I obtained and examined, sixty clearly stated that Internet commentators are picked from among staff members within each department or associated sector.¹⁰⁹ For instance, a traffic police branch in Sichuan province selected 24 young police officers in order to establish an online public opinion guidance task force.¹¹⁰ The CCP's Yangzhou Municipal Discipline Inspection Commission, Jiangsu province, drew 70 members from the ranks to reinforce the Internet commentator team.¹¹¹ The Environmental Protection Bureau of Beilun District in Ningbo city, Zhejiang province, designates one Internet commentator from every sector within the bureau.¹¹² Luanchuan county in Henan province hand-

¹⁰⁸China Digital Times. 'Chongqing wumao xitong wanzheng jigou ji mingdan (A complete construct and full list of Chongqing Internet commentators system). <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2011/04/重慶五毛系統完整結構及名單> (匿名來源) / (accessed 8 August 2015)

¹⁰⁹ Those departments ranging from police to education, their administrative level includes provincial, municipal, county, and township.

¹¹⁰ Neijiang Branch, Sichuan Traffic Police Department. 2010. 'Yunong Wangluoyuqing Yindao Shuli Xianjin Dianxing de Tansuo yu Sikao (A study on establishing role model by public opinion guidance),' 19 May <http://www.jxhld.gov.cn/news/g/3/201005/19-65203.html> (accessed 17 November 2014)

¹¹¹ Zhengjiang Jiufengwang. 'Yangzhoushi Jiwei Chutai Jubao Wangluoyuqing Chuzhifangfa (Discipline Inspection Commission of Yangzhou publishes procedure on handling Internet public opinion)' <http://www.zjjfw.gov.cn/2010/0401/660.html> (accessed 19 November 2014)

¹¹² Environmental Protection Bureau of Beilun District, Ningbo. 2011. 'Beilunqu huanbaoju 2009 nian gongzou zongjie (Work summary of 2009 by Environmental Protection Bureau of Beilun District),' 15 January http://www.blepb.gov.cn/show_gw.asp?

picked 83 employees from different units with outstanding political loyalty, strong communication skills, and who are familiar with web technology.¹¹³ An official from the propaganda department in Nanjing, Jiangsu province, reveals that their 20 Internet commentators drawn from different government offices are required to monitor Internet discussions for a few hours every day (Watts 2005). While they retain their original position and perform routine duties, guiding public opinion online can be considered as an additional task.

In addition to government employees, the party-state sometimes makes use of extra hands picked from among the ranks of ordinary netizens. Zhengding county in Hebei province posted an advertisement in 2006 recruiting Internet commentators from the public, who are firm in their political beliefs and familiar with the overall situation in the county.¹¹⁴ A website run by the police department in Guangdong province reportedly recruited 30 volunteer Internet commentators from the ranks of civil servants and private citizens. One of the volunteers was an employee from a commercial company who considered it an honor to be able to help the party-state.¹¹⁵ A Shanghai-based media worker acknowledged that he had been hired by the CCP as part-time Internet commentator due to his in-depth knowledge of the Internet and of online social media.¹¹⁶

In regards to rewards, Internet commentators do not necessarily receive 50 Chinese cents for every pro-government comment post, as it is widely believed. Official documents examined by me suggest that Internet commentators are well rewarded and incentivised by the government to encourage them to carry out their duty, but the exact amount of the reward varies between different government agencies. The CCP Committee of Bianpin County in Yunnan province, for instance, requires its Internet commentators to publish at least one comment per month and for every extra comment published on the Internet, the commentator receives 10 yuan (1.5 US dollars) as a bonus.¹¹⁷ According to article 17 of the 'Internet administrative methods' released by the Party School of Hengyang municipal Communist Party Committee, its Internet commentators receive 10 Chinese cents for every comment posted, and the total amount of bonus per month is capped at 100 yuan.¹¹⁸ The CCP's Jinchang municipal Discipline Inspection Commission announced that, had an online comment been selected and published by newspapers, magazines or websites at the provincial level, the commentator concerned would have been 'rewarded.'¹¹⁹

[id=1726](#) (accessed 19 November 2014)

113 Luanchuan Party Organization Department. 2012. 'Establishment of Internet commentator team in Luanchuan county, Luoyang city.' 19 March. <http://henan.people.com.cn/news/2012/03/19/603731.html> (accessed 26 November 2014)

114 Propaganda Department of Zhengding County Party Committee. 2009. 'Guanyu ahaoping wangluo pinglun yuan de tongzhi (Notice on the recruitment of Internet commentator).' 18 June. <http://www.zd.gov.cn/ReadNews.asp?NewsID=12226&BigClassName=%B9%AB%B8%E6%C0%B8&SmallClassName=%B9%AB%B8%E6%C0%B8&SpecialID=0> (accessed 13 November 2014)

115 Voice of America. 2010. '50 Cent Party', an invisible but loosen organization.' 8 October. <http://www.voachinese.com/content/article-20100810-hk-invisible-50-cent-party-100344484/517062.html> (accessed 10 November 2014)

116 Ai, Weiwei. 2012. 'Ai Weiwei's interview with Internet commentator W.' 29 January. (Interview conducted on 22 March 2011). <https://plus.google.com/s/%E8%89%BE%E6%9C%AA%E6%9C%AA%E5%AF%B9%E7%BD%91%E7%BB%9C%E8%AF%84%E8%AE%BA%E5%91%98W%E7%9A%84%E9%87%87%E8%AE%BF> (accessed 10 November 2014)

117 CCP Committee of Bianpin County. 2010. 'Bianpingxian sixiang coushi qianhua wangluo pinglun duiwu jianshe (Four measures to strengthen Internet commentator force of Bianping County),' 5 March. <http://www.pbdj.com.cn/gbgz/gbdwjs/2010-03-05/1176.html> (accessed 11 November 2014)

118 Hengyang Municipal Communist Party Committee. 2011. 'Dangxio Zhendi Wangluoyuan Guanli Banfa (Internet administrative methods for Party School magazine),' 21 January. The original message has been removed from the official website: <http://www.hydjnet.gov.cn/index.asp> A screenshot of the message can be found at Central European News Online <http://www.cenews.eu/?p=21320> (accessed 21 November 2014)

119 CCP Discipline Inspection Commission of Jinchang. 'Jinchangshi fanfuchanglian wangluo pinglun yuan gongzuo zhidu (Guideline for anti-corruption Internet commentators in Jinchang city),' <http://www.jcjjc.gov.cn/Article/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=181> (accessed 10 November 2014)

Internet commentators from the CCP's Discipline Inspection Commission of Ningxia Autonomous Region can expect cash rewards for every comment published online.¹²⁰

Whereas government employees assigned for the task of Internet commentary receive salaries on a regular basis, with the possibility of receiving an extra bonus, rewards for casual commentators who are private citizens also vary. The payment depends on the number of comment posts they make. The propaganda branch of a university pays 20 yuan and 30 yuan respectively for two separate threads of commentary.¹²¹ A Chinese student was reported to have earned around 100 to 120 yuan a month writing pro-government articles online.¹²² An employee who works at a municipal Internet propaganda office revealed that the reward for each post/ comment is between 0.5 to 1 yuan and the actual rate depends on the academic qualification and the quality of the work.¹²³ Based on this rate, an Internet commentator at the Internet office can expect a monthly bonus of 1,000, while a full time commentator may receive up to 2,000 yuan.

3.6. Workflow of Internet Commentators

There is a clear workflow for Internet commentators. The procedure runs as follows: monitor the Internet; collect information regarding public opinion; analyse situations; report to the superior; take steps to sway public opinion. An official document released by the CCP's Committee of Yongfu County gives a detailed account of online public opinion guidance mechanisms and provides unique insights into the structure and flow of its work, which is illustrated below:

- 1) The director of the Propaganda Department in Yongfu chairs the online public opinion monitoring office, which consists of three working groups, responsible for monitoring, assessing, and co-ordination respectively;
- 2) The monitoring team monitors the Internet by searching the keyword 'Yongfu County' on major search engines, and reports any Internet 'public opinion incident(s)' to their superior;
- 3) The assessment team analyses reports sent by the monitoring team and submits them to the leadership, who will decide how to respond;
- 4) The co-ordination team mobilizes Internet commentators to take action, which includes posting and following comments, drafting commentary, explaining the 'true nature' of the issue, or removing undesirable messages.¹²⁴

120 CCP's municipal Discipline Inspection Commission Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. 2007. '2007 nian Ningxia quanqu jijian jiancha xuanchuan jiaoyu gongzuo anpai yijian (Comments on propaganda work of discipline inspection in Ningxia region),' 17 April. <http://www.nxjjc.gov.cn/60/2007-4-17/40001@1500.htm> (accessed 11 November 2014)

121 Yu, Xin. .2011. 'China's Online Propagandists Revealed'. Radio Free Asia. (9 December). <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/online-12092011145353.html> (accessed 15 January 2015)

122 Ibid.

123 Ai Weiwei. 2012. 'Ai Weiwei's interview with Internet commentator X.' (interview date: 29 March 2011). 4 January. <https://plus.google.com/106372800511710859472/posts/9nFrfMn6LCH> (accessed 7 November 2014)

124 Government of Yongfu County. 2010. 'Yongfuxian wangluo yuqing jiankong shishi fangan (implementation of online public opinion monitoring mechanism in Yongfu county),' 18 August. <http://www.yzf.gov.cn/Html/zhengwugongkai/zhengfuwenjian/96532.html> (accessed 12 November 2014)

The tactics employed by Internet commentators include logging onto online forums, chat rooms and Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) with false IDs, and posting comments in favour of the government, explaining official positions, dismissing rumours, and, if necessary, deleting undesirable information. Internet commentators not only praise or support the government's policies, but also intentionally attempt to muddy the truth of a particular incident, such as falsifying eyewitness accounts to contradict a netizen's report of a police abuse incident (Cook 2011).

Besides local websites, major state media news websites, popular commercial portal websites, and online forums are the key targets of Internet commentators. The health department of Nanning requests its in-house Internet commentators to constantly monitor state media outlets People's Daily Online and Xinhua Net; online forums such as Tianya, Kdnet and Mop; major portal websites such as Sina and Sohu; and popular news websites including *Lianhe Zaobao* of Singapore.¹²⁵ Fangchenggang government in Guangxi province lists Sina weibo and Tencent qq, the most popular weibo in China, as being on the radar of their Internet commentators.¹²⁶ Numerous official documents and guidelines examined for this chapter present similar procedures regarding public opinion guidance in other government departments, agencies, and CCP committees at different administrative levels, such as the Propaganda Department of Fengyang county,¹²⁷ CCP Discipline Inspection Commission of Xuchang,¹²⁸ Organization Department of Jiangbei District,¹²⁹ and Jining municipal government.¹³⁰

A considerable number of news reports and official announcements regarding training sessions for Internet commentators across government departments can be found on the Internet. The length of the training programmes lasts from one day to several days, and the size of the classes ranges between less than ten and more than two hundred. A typical training session involves the teaching of how to monitor, interpret and direct Internet public opinion; how to draft commentary; and the introduction of the theory and methodology of Internet commenting. Speakers and instructors normally include senior officials from the Propaganda Department, and senior journalists or editors from the state media. In addition to officials, experts from commercial websites and Internet users are also involved. In the training session for Guangshui Police Department, three netizens were invited to give talks to Internet commentators in an audience that comprised police officers and police staff.¹³¹ An editor from Tencent, one of the largest commercial portal websites, taught participants at the external propaganda office of Wusu in northwest China how to make good use of Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter, to promote government policies

125 Health Department of Nanning. 2007. 'Guanyu zai nanjing weisheng xitong jianli wangluo pinglunyuanyuan duiwu de tongzhi (Notice on the establishment of Internet commentator team within the health system of Nanning),' 4 April. <http://www.nnws.gov.cn/brower/T215/W2201.shtml> (accessed 10 November 2014)

126 Guangxi pufawang. 2012. 'Fangchenggang sifa xingzheng xitong zhengfa xuanchuanzhou houdong youshengyouse (Fangchenggang held a successful propaganda campaign week regarding law and order),' 28 March. http://www.gxpf.gov.cn/news_show.asp?id=7244 (accessed 10 November 2014)

127 Propaganda Department of Fengyang county, Xuanchuanbu (Propaganda Department), 14 March 2011. <http://www.fengyang.gov.cn/dt2111111269.asp?DocID=2111123464> (accessed 10 November 2014)

128 CCP Discipline Inspection Commission of Xuchang. 2010. 'Nuli tisheng fanfu changlian (Improve capability of anti-corruption),' 23 April. http://www.xclz.gov.cn/Data/4/11/75/201004/2784834_938.shtml (accessed 10 November 2014)

129 Jiangbei District government. 2009. 'Ningbo jiangbei quwei zuzhibu jianli wangluo xuanchuan duiwu (Establishing Internet commentator team at Organization Department of Jiangbei District),' 18 December. <http://www.jbzg.gov.cn/news.aspx?CategoryId=4&ContentId=1217230376> (accessed 10 November 2014)

130 Jining Municipal government. Guanyu jianli wangluo pinglunyuanyuan duiwu de tongzhi (Announcement of establishing Internet commentator team) <http://www.jnsz.gov.cn/eWebEditor/UploadFile/20095271175690.doc> (accessed 15 November 2014)

131 Guangshui Police Department. 2009. 'Guangshui gonganju juxing wangluo pinglunyuanyuan penxun (Guangshui Police Department held training session for Internet commentators),' 19 October. <http://gsga.zggs.gov.cn/GAYW/2009/10/09101991415595.html> (accessed 6 November 2014)

and to guide public opinion.¹³² Through a quick online search of Chinese government websites, I identified dozens of training workshops for Internet commentators that took place across China over the past few years.

The deployment of Internet commentators among government apparatuses at different administrative levels is an ongoing policy with the earliest instance mentioned by the official media in 2004, when CCP's Changsha Municipal Committee hired a team of Internet commentators. One of the latest offices to set up an Internet commentator task force was the Huaian district government of Jiangsu province on 17 May 2012.¹³³ The process of setting up an Internet commentator team is also well developed. One example is the Bureau for Letters and Calls, the administrative department responsible for handling complaints and grievances from individuals in Anhui province, who called for the formation of Internet commentator teams within the provincial letters and calls system. Their request notice consists of three parts with detailed descriptions of the duty, selection criteria, and management of the Internet commentator. It also requires the appointment of no less than 20 commentators at county level, 40 at municipal level, and 5 at provincial level.¹³⁴ The same notice was passed down to municipal bureaus and then county bureaus of the province to implement this policy.

Another example of a well-structured Internet commentator mechanism can be seen at the Discipline Inspection Committee (DIC) of Shandong province. According to the deputy party secretary of DIC, a provincial Internet commentator conference was held following the completion of the national Internet commentator training programme, which further clarified the important duty of Internet propaganda and commentary. An Internet propaganda team was set up at the provincial level, with an official assigned to the task of liaison with the Central Discipline Inspection Committee.¹³⁵

3.7. Voluntary 50 Cent Party

In addition to government Internet commentators, there is another group of Internet commentators consisting of ordinary netizens who voluntarily post pro-government messages. Since the volunteers willingly speak for the government without asking for the famous reward of 50 cents, they are nicknamed *zi gan wu* (*zidai ganliang de wumao*—50 Cent Party who brings their own dried food). The emergence of *zi gan wu*, or 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party' was largely a reaction to pervasive criticism and rumours targeting the regime. The identification with the 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party' is both externally imposed and actively chosen. When online interactions turn antagonistic, netizens commonly label other netizens they perceive as pro-government as members of the '50 Cent Party.'

132 Wusu government online. 2011. 'Wusu canjia wangluo pinglun yuan dianshi peixun kecheng (Wusu participates in televised training course for Internet commentator),' 28 October. <http://www.xjtc.gov.cn/zhengwugongkai/xianshidongtai/21162/> (accessed 6 November 2014)

133 Huaian People's Government. 2012. 'Zai woqu jianli wangluo pinglun yuan duiwu (Establishment of Internet commentator task force in our district),' 17 May. <http://www.hacz.gov.cn/xwzx/40289e9737585b7901375878042f0010.html> (accessed 6 November 2014)

134 Haozhou government online. 2009. 'Guanyu zai xingfang ju jianli wangluo pinglun duiwu de tongzhi (Notice on the establishment of Internet commentator team at the Bureau for Letters and Calls),' 30 July. <http://www.bzzwgk.gov.cn/XxgkNewsHtml/SA051/200907/SA051000301200907008.html> (accessed 16 November 2014)

135 Hui, Shulin. 2005. 'Shenhua renshi jiaqiang fanfu changlian wangluo xuanchuan (Deepen understanding and strengthen Internet propaganda on anti-corruption),' 31 March. http://www.cniciw.gov.cn/info_disp.php?id=1930 (accessed 16 November 2014)

Once labelled as members of the '50 Cent Party,' some netizens have subverted the pejorative label and turned it into a badge of honour and superiority: they believe that they are demeaned only because they are more patriotic and rational than their opponents. The Chinese political scientist Zhang Shengjun explicitly links the '50 Cent Party' to patriotism by arguing that the label has become a 'baton waved at all Chinese patriots.'¹³⁶ It is not a coincidence that the 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party' often evince nationalistic opinions who tend to view the West skeptically and are more likely to support the party-state.

Han (2015b) has identified five tactics employed by the 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party', namely: labelling wars, face-slapping, cross-talk, fishing, and positive mobilization. Labelling wars provided the initial momentum for the formation of the 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party' identity: some netizens become 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party' because they are labelled state-sponsored '50 Cent Party.' Face-slapping refers to confrontations where netizens mount an attack ruthlessly and directly, pointing out errors in logic, factual mistakes or discrepancies. Cross-talk involves the collective ridicule of enemies. As in popular performances of cross-talk, the 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party' use exaggeration, irony, and parody to highlight the 'illogical' arguments of their opponents. Fishing works by 'hooking' netizens with false or fabricated information. For positive mobilization, the 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party' sometimes also mobilise shared beliefs, values, and emotions directly. I will examine how the 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party' implemented these tactics in the anti-Taiwanese independence campaign in the 'Internet commentator in action' section of this chapter.

Due to their anonymous identity and to the fluidity of cyberspace, it is impossible to estimate the size of the 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party.' However, there are indicators of the reach of the group which suggest that the 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party' has become a significant force in online expression. Although representing a small portion of netizens, the 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party' has firmly established itself in cyberspace. 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party' have occupied not only small-scale forums that attract nationalistic netizens or military enthusiasts, but also popular boards on major forums like Tianya, MITBBS and NEWSMTH Han (2015b). Tianya is the largest internet forum in China that attracts millions of visitors daily, whilst the latter two are the most popular student forums with 30,000 plus simultaneous users each. Not all netizens identify with the 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party' but the group has gained traction on these platforms, demonstrating its capacity to reach a wide audience, as netizens 'vote' with their attention and visit platforms where they are prominent.

If we consider government Internet commentators as a 'regular army,' the 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party' can be seen as an 'auxiliary army' recognised by the party-state as a useful force in the cyberspace. *Guanming Daily*, the CCP's newspaper, called the 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party' the 'firm practitioners of the core value of socialism,' who dismiss slander against China, refute rumour, and explain China in a subjective manner.¹³⁷ Suggesting that the 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party' had been demonised, a commentary piece published on the CCP News website pointed out that although they are not necessarily 'fans' of the government, they are patriotic. The article further argues that spreading 'positive energy' is crucial to

136 Zhang Shengjun. 2010. 'Wumaodang de maozi neng xiazhu shui? (Who will be intimidated by being labelled as fifty-cent army?),' <http://news.163.com/10/0120/16/5TG1UTRM00012GGA.html> (accessed 14 November 2015).

137 Zhao Shibing. 2014. 'Ziganwu' shi shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhi guan de jiangding jianxingzhe (Voluntary 50 Cent Party is the firm practitioners of the core value of socialism),' *Guanming Daily*, 15 November. http://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2014-11/15/nw.D110000gmr_b_20141115_2-10.htm (accessed 15 November 2015)

Internet governance, and that the 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party' should take more responsibility in the process.¹³⁸ An official from Bozhou Propaganda Department, Inner Mongolia, sees the 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party' as patriotic netizens who dare to participate in the struggle of public opinion and ideology.¹³⁹ Even though the 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party' represent only a small portion of the 60 million netizens in China, once mobilised, they can exert significant influence on online public opinion. The potential of the 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party' to supplement government Internet commentators in swaying online public opinion is immense.

3.8. Internet Commentators In Action

Since Internet commentators use false names to post comments on the Internet, it is impossible to identify them with 100 percent certainty. However, there are signs indicating that a commentator could be from the 50 Cent Party instead of an ordinary user, a) if the user account lacks personal information, was opened recently, or does not show much activity; b) if the content of comments on a particular topic is repetitive or copied and pasted from previous comments. The following three cases provide an indication of the work of Internet commentators on different media platforms.

An online message board for President Xi was launched by the CCP News website in 2014. Titled 'Cheering uncle Xi' (*Xi dada jiayou*), the aim of this message board is for the netizens to 'applause, cheer, and leave encouraging messages for Xi.'¹⁴⁰ It has attracted 7,000 messages, with 20% of the 400 messages posted on the first twenty pages containing identical wording, 'Xi dada jiayou.' Many other messages were simply a variation of this, such as 'jiayou, Xi dada,' 'President Xi jiayou,' 'Xi dada jiayou! Jiayou!' A great proportion of the remaining the messages were praising Xi: 'Xi dada you are the best,' 'Xi dada we support you unconditionally.' While comments left by netizens on message boards dedicated to provincial leaders and to the Premier (which will be examined in detail in the Government Online Message Board chapter) are for the most part enquiries, complaints and suggestions, comments on Xi's message board merely pay tribute to him. Since all messages are left by anonymous users, which is the default setting of the message board, with usernames displayed as 'netizen,' it is difficult to determine if and how many of the posts were the work of Internet commentators. Although it is normal that netizens are genuinely grateful to Xi, the overwhelmingly positive tone of the message board inevitably raises suspicions as to the possible involvement of Internet commentators.

The following two incidents provide additional compelling evidence that shows the work of Internet commentators. The first case took place in Tianjin in August 2015, when a series of large chemical explosions killed over 170 people and injured 800. Tianjin officials faced huge criticism for their mishandling of the incident, from covering up the death toll, to downplaying the scale of the damage, to their negligence of safety regulations. As always, online public opinion was particularly critical towards the

138Xu Lan. 2014. 'Ziganwu' bei wuminghua yizhi duoyuan biaoda ('Voluntary 50 Cent Party' has been demonised which suppresses freedom of expression), CCP News, 18 November. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/pinglun/n/2014/1118/c241220-26048448.html> (accessed 15 November 2015)

139Chen Jiangxia. 2014. 'Ziganwu shi 'furen' (Voluntary 50 Cent Party is 'rich'),' Qiushi, 22 December. http://www.qstheory.cn/politics/2014-12/22/c_1113727697.htm (accessed 14 August 2015)

140Xi dada jiayou Online Message Board. CCP News website. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/18/GB/351657/> (accessed 6 August 2015)

government, with many netizens questioning the competence of Tianjin officials and arguing over who should be held responsible for the disaster. As we have seen in the guidelines for government Internet commentators in the earlier section, the Tianjin explosion was a typical major incident that required commentators to sway public opinion in government's favour.



Illustration 1: Screenshot of messages left on Sina News by Internet commentators in response to news of the Tianjin explosions

I found indications of Internet commentator participation in every news article concerning the Tianjin explosions published on Sina News in the summer of 2015. For example, in the comment section of a

story about the investigation of the company behind the explosion, eight netizens, all claiming to be from Maoming, Guangdong, left 20 comments in a row.¹⁴¹ (See Figure 1) Each of the netizens left three to four comments, and half of the messages were identical, in other words, copied and pasted. One of the comments read 'don't believe in rumour, don't spread rumour, pray for a safe Tianjin.' Another copied and pasted comment read 'salute to the firefighters of Tianjin, you are the heroes in our hearts.' Visiting the Sina Weibo accounts of these eight commentators, I found that their accounts were opened between 2011 and May 2015, all before the Tianjin explosion, which suggests that the accounts were not set up solely for this incident. One of these Weibo accounts lists 'Internet writer' (*wangluo wangshou*) as her profession,¹⁴² while the others do not specify their occupations.

On Tianya, a popular online forum, comments regarding the explosion were overwhelmingly hostile towards the government as one could hardly find any pro-government messages. A netizen with the username '@jianzhi yao zhuce' urged 'don't believe in rumour, don't spread rumour, trust the government,' a standard slogan of the party-state used in the event of major incidents.¹⁴³ Discussing if government officials should be held accountable for the explosion, a netizen '@wumao,' which literally means 50 cents, suggested that the government would take responsibility for the damage. His comments were quickly dismissed as rhetoric in favour of the government by other netizens, who called him 'a true 50 cent party.'¹⁴⁴ The Tianjin explosions resulted in heavy casualties for ordinary citizens and were due to official negligence. The circumstances inevitably led to hostility in online public opinion towards the state that made it difficult, if not impossible, for Internet commentators to sway public views.

The second example showing Internet commentators in action concerns the attacks on participants in the labour movement. Zeng Feiyang, the director of the Panyu Workers Service Centre, was detained in December 2015 in a massive crackdown on labour rights activists in Guangdong province. On 22 December 2015, the Weibo account of Beijing's Police Department, Ping'an Beijing, reposted a piece from Xinhua News accusing Zeng of, among other charges, causing social disorder.¹⁴⁵ However, labour rights activists believed that it was the Chinese government's latest attempt to suppress NGOs.¹⁴⁶ Ping'an Beijing's Weibo post attracted 1,454 comments within three weeks, with the majority condemning Zeng and his NGO. A closer look at the anti-Zeng comments reveals that three of the most common lines had been copied and pasted. The themes of the recurring statements are that labour activists: i) smeared the party and the government's image; ii) conducted illegal activities in the name of upholding labour rights; and iii) represented public opinion via deception, and put pressure on the state by spreading rumours. Figure 2 shows a selection of comments posted by different Weibo users minutes apart.

141 Sina News. 2015. 'Tianjin baozha qiye laoban shoufang jiekai duoge mituan (Bosses of Tianjin explosion gave interview reveals many mysteries),' 19 August. <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2015-08-19/125832222592.shtml> (accessed 16 September 2015)

142 Sina Weibo account of Huiyou Tianshi Baohu wo de. http://www.weibo.com/p/1005052540561382/info?mod=pedit_more (accessed 16 September 2015)

143 Tianya. 2015. 'Tianjin dabaozha...zhenxiang zai nali? (Tianjin explosion, where's the truth),' 14 August. <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-5215152-1.shtml> (accessed 16 August 2015)

144 Tianya. 2015. 'Tianjin dabaozha...zhenxiang zai nali? (Tianjin explosion, where's the truth),' 15 August. <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-5215152-8.shtml> (accessed 16 August 2015)

145 □ Ping'an Beijing. 'Xinhua wang: jiekai gongyun zhixing guanghuan de beihou (Xinhua net: reveals the truth of the "star of labour movement")', 22 December 2015. Sina Weibo. http://www.weibo.com/1288915263/D9Ddop4pW?filter=hot&type=comment#_rnd1461498873315 (accessed 18 January 2016)

146 □ BBC News. 2015. 'Renmin ribao qidi beibu guangdong gongyun renshi zeng feiyang (the people's daily reveals the "background" of the detained labour rights activist zeng feiyang),' 23 December. http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/china/2015/12/151223_china_labour_activists (accessed 18 January 2016)



Illustration 2: Screenshot of repetitive comments left on the Weibo account of Ping'an Beijing

The same pattern can be observed again and again in users' comments to that post: identical words are repeated strategically. Looking further at the Weibo accounts of the users who copied and pasted those lines showed similarities: most of the accounts provide no personal information and had not posted anything on their own accounts since 2012. This is not to suggest that the accounts were created by the same person, but more likely that different users acted at the same time. Besides repeating the same rhetoric, another suspicious pattern is posting pro-government comments by using similar account names in a row. As Figure 3 shows, user names 'yulun 001,' 'yulun 002,' 'yulun 003,' and 'juyi0317,' 'juyi0716,' 'juyi999,' and 'juyi888' posted comments exactly every two minutes. Looking at these accounts, I found two things in common: they claimed to be from Shanghai and posted their most recent Weibo comments on 20 August 2012.

Netizens in China are required to provide their real name and identity when setting up a Weibo account, however they are allowed to use a nickname on their profile. Apart from verified accounts, such as those of celebrities or officials, it is difficult to be a hundred percent sure of the true identity of most Weibo accounts. Although we cannot conclude that all pro-government comments are posted by Internet commentators, the positive remarks on Ping'an Beijing barely received support from other users, evidenced by the fact that no one 'liked' them. In fact, two of the most popular comments, that received

most 'likes,' were critical towards Internet commentators. The top comments were posted by a netizen 'huanzhe benren (a patient myself)' who wrote 'a kind reminder, you Internet commentators should change your rhetoric, it was too repetitive, we can spot it easily. Those Internet commentators did not pay attention to their work, they need to be supervised.'¹⁴⁷ Another top comment was made by 'Alvin xi,' who said 'so many 5 mao.'¹⁴⁸

On Tianya, a popular online forum, an user 'deep blue0319' reposted the same piece from Xinhua on the same day as Ping'an Beijing.¹⁴⁹ The post attracted 111 comments, all pro-government, and criticised the NGO. Of those comments, 12 came from a single user name 'mango pie sesame,' and 17 were made by another user called 'Plato cyq eternal.' Both users posted their comments at one minute intervals (See Figure 4). Looking at their profile pages on Tianya, I found that they never posted anything original, but only made comments.¹⁵⁰ The topics they commented on were all regarding sensitive cases, such as the arrest of Liu Wei, a journalist from the Southern Metropolis Daily, the trail of human rights lawyer Pu Zhiqiang, and the disappearance of Hong Kong bookseller Gui Minhui. The tone of their messages was overwhelmingly supportive of the government.

147□ Ping'an Beijing. 'Xinhua wang: jiekai gongyun zhixing guanghuan de beihou (Xinhua net: reveals the truth of the "star of labour movement",) 22 December 2015. Sina Weibo. http://www.weibo.com/1288915263/D9Ddop4pW?filter=hot&type=comment#_rnd1461498873315 (accessed 18 January 2016)

148

□bid.

149□ Deep blue0319, 'Jiekai gongyun zhixing guanghuan de beihou (reveals the truth of the "star of labour movement",) 22 December 2015. Tianya forum. <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-333-788917-1.shtml> (accessed 19 January 2016)

150□ See profile page of 'mango pie sesame' on Tianya forum. <http://www.tianya.cn/107021113/bbs?t=reply> and profile page of 'Plato cyq eternal' <http://www.tianya.cn/101765247/bbs?t=reply> (accessed 19 January 2016)

帖子名	版块	时间
Re: 揭开“工运之星”光环的背后--“番禺打工族文书处理服务部”主任...	台湾	2015-12-23 16:09
Re: 揭开“工运之星”光环的背后--“番禺打工族文书处理服务部”主任...	台湾	2015-12-23 16:08
Re: 揭开“工运之星”光环的背后--“番禺打工族文书处理服务部”主任...	台湾	2015-12-23 16:07
Re: 揭开“工运之星”光环的背后--“番禺打工族文书处理服务部”主任...	台湾	2015-12-23 16:06
Re: 揭开“工运之星”光环的背后--“番禺打工族文书处理服务部”主任...	台湾	2015-12-23 16:05
Re: 揭开“工运之星”光环的背后--“番禺打工族文书处理服务部”主任...	台湾	2015-12-23 16:04
Re: 揭开“工运之星”光环的背后--“番禺打工族文书处理服务部”主任...	台湾	2015-12-23 16:01
Re: 揭开“工运之星”光环的背后--“番禺打工族文书处理服务部”主任...	台湾	2015-12-23 16:01
Re: 揭开“工运之星”光环的背后--“番禺打工族文书处理服务部”主任...	台湾	2015-12-23 16:00
Re: 揭开“工运之星”光环的背后--“番禺打工族文书处理服务部”主任...	台湾	2015-12-23 15:59
Re: 揭开“工运之星”光环的背后--“番禺打工族文书处理服务部”主任...	台湾	2015-12-23 15:58
Re: 揭开“工运之星”光环的背后--“番禺打工族文书处理服务部”主任...	台湾	2015-12-23 15:57
Re: 揭开“工运之星”光环的背后--“番禺打工族文书处理服务部”主任...	台湾	2015-12-23 15:54
Re: 揭开“工运之星”光环的背后--“番禺打工族文书处理服务部”主任...	台湾	2015-12-23 15:54
Re: 揭开“工运之星”光环的背后--“番禺打工族文书处理服务部”主任...	台湾	2015-12-23 15:52
Re: 揭开“工运之星”光环的背后--“番禺打工族文书处理服务部”主任...	台湾	2015-12-23 15:52
Re: 揭开“工运之星”光环的背后--“番禺打工族文书处理服务部”主任...	台湾	2015-12-23 15:51
Re: 南都记者刘伟被刑拘 曾跟踪报道王林案 (转载)	多彩贵州	2015-10-22 11:23
Re: 南都记者刘伟被刑拘 曾跟踪报道王林案 (转载)	多彩贵州	2015-10-22 11:22
Re: 南都记者刘伟被刑拘 曾跟踪报道王林案 (转载)	多彩贵州	2015-10-22 11:21

Illustration 3: Screenshot of profile page of 'Plato cyq eternal' on Tianya

The posting style of the suspected Weibo Internet commentators above follows the same working pattern—publishing more than a dozen comments in less than two hours, usually one to two comments every minute, with a pause, then a short burst of other posts before moving to a completely different topic after a few months. This unique pattern looks like the behaviour of a professional commentator on an assembly line instead of an ordinary user. Besides posting a flurry of comments, another observed pattern is repeating the same pro-government rhetoric which can be found on Weibo. Six comments left on Tianya were identical and read 'Providing free services in the name of labour rights protection was not their true intention, instead using workers' strikes to make a profit was their hidden agenda.'¹⁵¹ Users who copied and pasted these comments never posted anything original on their own page, do not have followers, and do not follow anyone else either. It seems that the sole purpose of those accounts was to make pro-government comments on sensitive issues.

151 □ Deep blue0319, 'Jiekai gongyun zhixing guanghuan de beihou (reveals the truth of the “star of labour movement”),' 22 December 2015. Tianya forum. <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-333-788917-1.shtml> (accessed 19 January 2016)

Although the labour rights group being suppressed was in Guangdong, their treatment received nationwide attention. In addition to Xinhua mentioned earlier, other two main central state media, the *People's Daily* and CCTV, all ran special reports revealing the alleged crime committed by Zeng.¹⁵² Those reports were republished by other news media across China, which created a sense of national campaign against the labour rights movement. As I have discussed in an earlier section, Internet commentators only act after receiving orders from their superiors. It would not be surprising to find that the commentators mentioned above received directions to launch attacks on Zeng and his colleagues, as well as to sway public opinion in favour of the government.

Besides government Internet commentators, the Chinese 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party' (*zi gan wu*) have also been speaking for the Chinese government. The following case illustrates a well coordinated campaign organised by *zi gan wu* on an unprecedented scale. In January 2016, tens of thousands of Chinese netizens circumvented China's Great Firewall and flooded the Facebook pages of Taiwanese President-elect Tsai Ing-wen and of two other Taiwanese news media with pro-China comments on an unprecedented scale. Based on the evidence available, this campaign appeared to be organised by the netizens themselves instead of by the CCP. Nonetheless, the party-state censorship machine did not prevent them from bypassing the firewall while the state media praised the motivations of this campaign.

Taiwan held its Presidential election on 16 January 2016, with Tsai Ing-wen from the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) elected President. Compared with the outgoing President Ma Ying-jeou of the Nationalist Party (or Kuomintang, KMT), who embraces the 1992 Consensus of 'one China with different interpretations' and who does not rule out the possibility of reunification with mainland China, the DPP advocates a policy of status quo and perhaps independence in the future. Since the CCP maintains that Taiwan is part of the People's Republic of China and is strongly against the Taiwanese independence, the election of Tsai poses a potential threat to Beijing's 'one China policy.' The Chinese state media warned after the election that Taiwan should abandon its 'hallucinations' about pushing for independence, as any moves towards it would be a "poison."¹⁵³ While the Chinese government were less hostile towards Tsai compared with Chen Shui-bian, the DPP's last president, Chinese netizens decided to bombard Tsai's Facebook with anti-Taiwanese independence messages.

In the early morning of 20 January, a Sina Weibo user named 'Zhaoritian233' announced the 'marching to Facebook at 7pm' to have 'friendly conversations with pro-Taiwanese Independence comrades on the other side of the strait.'¹⁵⁴ Netizens were divided into six working groups with different tasks, such as collecting pro-Taiwanese independence evidence, photos, making graphics, publicity, clicking 'like' on others' postings, and translating into English and other languages (for the world to understand their campaign). Five hours before the starting time, the first announcement of the details and guidelines were posted on Di Ba (also known as D8 or Liyi Ba) of Baidu Tieba, a very popular online forum run by the

152 □ Zhang, Cong. 2015. 'qidi gongyuan zhixing zhen mianmu (revealing the true face of 'the star of labour movement'),' the People's Daily Online. 23 December. <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2015/12/23/c1001-27963407.html> and CCTV News. 2015 'gongyun zhixing zeng feiyang zuian diaocha (criminal investigation of the star of labour movement zeng feiyang),' 23 December. <http://news.cntv.cn/2015/12/23/VIDE1450847339236690.shtml> (accessed 19 January 2016)

153 Reuters. 2016. 'After vote, China tells Taiwan to abandon independence "hallucination"', 17 January. <http://www.reuters.com/article/taiwan-election-idUSKCN0UV02I> (accessed 22 January 2016)

154 Sina Weibo account of Zhaoritian233. http://www.weibo.com/u/3503599593?profile_ftype=1&is_ori=1#_0 (accessed 23 January 2016)

Chinese Internet search engine giant Baidu. Organisers urged participants not to use any pictures of Chinese leaders and to be 'civilised' and 'reasonable' in their postings on Facebook.

At 6:50 pm, 10 minutes before the expedition, the official Weibo account of the Chinese Communist Youth League Central Committee posted a poem called Qilv Long March, written by Mao Zedong during the CCP's military conflicts with the KMT in the 1930s. Along with the poem was a picture depicting the CCP's Red Army crossing a river by boats. Although this post did not mention the upcoming Facebook campaign, given the timing and implication of the message, it was considered as an encouragement from the party-state. Many netizens commented on this post saying that 'everything follows the command,' 'is this the (official) approval of the campaign?'¹⁵⁵ Although the Chinese Communist Youth League Central Committee did not confirm or deny its involvement, the fact that this post remains available on its Weibo account indicates that the party-state is not against this campaign.

At 7:00 pm, netizens collectively circumvented China's Great Firewall and flooded Tsai's official Facebook page as well as media outlets Sanlih E-Television and Apple Daily. Since Facebook is blocked in China, the campaign was live broadcasted in China on different media platforms, including Douyu TV, Bilibili, and Xiongmao TV for other Chinese netizens to appreciate it.¹⁵⁶ Tsai's Facebook page was the main target, seeing thousands of comments by Chinese netizens to every picture and post. Those messages were either in line with the CCP's Taiwan policy or reflect the mainstream attitude towards Taiwan. 'Your root is here, come back soon...' one user said. Another addressed the separatists 'Can you stop barking in China's territory?' One of the Chinese netizens wrote 'Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau and Chinese people around the world, we are all yellow skin, have black eyes, speak Chinese, and flow with the blood of the dragon... We belong to the Chinese nation, we are Chinese.'¹⁵⁷ In addition to sending official messages, Chinese netizens also attempted to win the hearts and minds of the Taiwanese through references to Chinese cuisine and to China's beautiful landscape. A user named Li Miranda Huang shared a long list of Chinese dishes and urged Taiwanese to 'return to the arms of the fatherland' in order to enjoy this delicious food.

While many comments were written by individual netizens, the majority of the comments were simply copied and pasted as standard messages. One of the most common posts was a poem called Homesick (*xiangchou*), which refers to the links between mainland China and Taiwan. The poem posted on Tsai's Facebook page came with an English translation, which ends with 'My homesickness is a shallow strait, I am here, The mainland is there.' Another message most commonly copied and pasted by Chinese netizens was the Eight Honours and Eight Shames developed by the former Chinese leader Hu Jintao regarding the concepts of honour and disgrace. The opening line of the Eight Honours and Eight Shames is 'Honour to those who love the motherland, shame on those who harm the motherland' (see below).

155Sina Weibo account of the Chinese Communist Youth League Central Committee. 18:50, 20 January 2016. <http://www.weibo.com/u/3937348351> (accessed 22 January 2016)

156Tencent. 2016. 'Di Ba chuzheng FB: zhibo pingtai bei feng (Di Ba marching on FB: live broadcast platforms closed),' Tencent Tech News, 21 January <http://tech.qq.com/a/20160121/011570.htm> (accessed 23 January 2016)

157Tsai Ing-wen Facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/tsaiingwen/?ref=ts&fref=ts> (accessed 24 January)



蔡英文 Tsai Ing-wen

Like This Page · 18 hrs ·

Like · Comment · Share

638 people like this.

Top Comments ▾

4 shares

78 comments



郭默默 以热爱祖国为荣，以危害祖国为耻

Honor to those who love the motherland, shame on those who harm the motherland;

以服务人民为荣，以背离人民为耻

Honor to those who serve the people, shame on those who betray the people;

以崇尚科学为荣，以愚昧无知为耻

Honor to those who believe in science, shame on those who choose to remain ignorant;

以辛勤劳动为荣，以好逸恶劳为耻

Honor to those who are hard-working, shame on those who are lazy and avoid work;

以团结互助为荣，以损人利己为耻

Honor to those who uphold unity and help one another, shame on those who seek personal gain at other's expense;

以诚实守信为荣，以见利忘义为耻

Honor to those who are honest and trustworthy, shame on those who trade principle for profits;

以遵纪守法为荣，以违法乱纪为耻

Honor to those who are disciplined and law-abiding, shame on those who are undisciplined and break the laws;

以艰苦奋斗为荣，以骄奢淫逸为耻。

Honor to those who practice plain living and defy adversity, shame on those who indulge in extravagance and pleasures-seeking.

Like · Reply · 3 · 15 hrs



马圳 以熱愛祖國為榮 以危害祖國為恥

以服務人民為榮 以背離人民為恥

以崇尚科學為榮 以愚昧無知為恥... See More

Like · Reply · 4 · 15 hrs

Illustration 4: Screenshot of Tsai Ing-wen's Facebook flooded by messages from the 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party'

It is estimated that at least 4,000 netizens were involved in the Taiwan anti-independence campaign. More than 60% of them are members of China's post-1990 generation.¹⁵⁸ An hour after the attack, the

158 Marco Huang. 2016. 'Chinese Netizens Flood Tsai Ing-Wen's Facebook Page With Anti-Taiwan Independence Posts,' 21 January, *The Wall Street Journal*. <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2016/01/21/chinese-netizens-flood-tsai-ing-wens-facebook-page-with-anti-taiwan-independence-posts/> (accessed 22 January 2016)

hashtag 'Di Ba Facebook expedition' (*#Di Ba fb chuzheng#*) was the top-ranked hashtag on Sina Weibo, with nearly 800,000 followers.¹⁵⁹ Observing comments left on Tsai's Facebook page, I found the following regarding the identity of the netizens involved. Firstly, the majority of the pro-China comments were written with simplified Chinese characters, which suggests that they were most likely the work of netizens with mainland Chinese background as people in Taiwan use transitional Chinese. Furthermore, the spelling of the participants' names is based on China's *Pinyin* system rather than Taiwan's Wade–Giles system. Secondly, many of the participants set up accounts only on the day of the campaign, most of them do not have their personal photo as profile picture, and there are no postings on their timelines. These signs indicate that the purpose of their accounts is solely to aid the campaign. Thirdly, some of the participants are actual Facebook users who have been active on the website prior to the campaign. According to information displayed on their page, most of them are students currently studying overseas, while a small number are students living in mainland China. Judging from the posts and pictures on their timeline, they are ordinary netizens instead of government officials or employee.

Based on my observations above, I suggest that the Taiwan-related campaign was the work of *ziganwu* rather than a state action. The march on Facebook campaign was mobilised on the online forum Di Ba, established in 2004, which enjoys more than 20 million followers. Its users, many of whom are nationalists, built a tradition of launching collective action on social issues in the past decade.¹⁶⁰ A user named Wan Bozhen commented on a picture on Tsai's Facebook: 'this cultural exchange activity was a spontaneous action organised by netizens on Di Ba, with the aim to shorten distance between netizens on both sides of the strait...'¹⁶¹ Commenting on her motivation, netizen Dingding said that it was mostly due to the 'legend of Di Ba,' where she hoped she could contribute to this campaign by leveraging her knowledge of Facebook.¹⁶² Another participant Ma Ke, who claimed to be a white collar worker, said he was not happy with some of the pro-Taiwanese independence comments on the Internet, and therefore wanted to contribute to the campaign.¹⁶³ Given the popularity of Di Ba among young netizens, it is credible that participants to the campaign were ordinary Internet users fighting for a cause.

Although the Chinese government never acknowledged its involvement, state media made positive remarks about the campaign and about its participants. A commentary piece on the People's Daily pointed out that 'we must thank the many unnamed 'Diba' netizens who organized yesterday's 'exchange'.¹⁶⁴ An editorial in the Global Times recognised that the motivation of the campaign was based on patriotism, and emphasised that it was entirely initiated by young netizens in mainland China without any influence from the government.¹⁶⁵ *Beijing News* wrote a commentary published on its WeChat

159 Ibid.

160NetEase News. 2016. 'Liyi Ba weicheng 'Di Ba' (How has liyi ba become di ba),' The Paper, 22 January.

<http://tech.163.com/16/0122/14/BDUL0GUC000915BF.html> (accessed 24 January 2016)

161Tsai Ing-wen Facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/tsaiingwen/?ref=ts&fref=ts> (accessed 24 January 2016)

162Wu Jing. 2016. 'Wo fanqiang, yinwei wo aiguo (I circumvented the great firewall because I love my country),' The Intium, 3

February. <https://theintium.com/article/20160203-mainland-little-pink/> (accessed 3 February 2016)

163Sina News, 2016. 'Diba fb chuzheng zuzhizhe: shua barong bachi gei taidu shang aiguo ke (Organisers of Di Ba fb expedition: posting Eight Honours and Eight Shames to teach Taiwanese independence a patriotic lesson),' 21 January.

<http://news.sina.com.cn/czg/2016-01-21/doc-ixnuxxe8316358.shtml> (accessed 24 January 2016)

164NetEase News. 2016. 'Renmin ribao pin diba chuzheng fb (The People's Daily comments on Diba Facebook expedition),' Republished from the People's Daily, 22 January. http://tech.163.com/16/0122/09/BDU4UF91000915BF_all.html (accessed 24 January 2016)

165Global Times. 2016. 'Sheping: bubi kuazhang 'di ba chuzheng' de liangan fu xiaoguo (Do not exaggerate the negative impact of 'di ba expedition' on the cross-strait relations),' 21 January. <http://opinion.huangqi.com/editorial/2016-01/8425254.html> (accessed 22 January 2016)

account: 'in the past, we called these commentators paid posters, now we call them 'patriotic soldiers'.¹⁶⁶ However, after initial praise, the party-state started to temper the campaign fever in the Internet community by issuing censorship directives to all media outlets in China. The instruction reads 'the 'Diba Expedition' has become complicated. Regional media must moderate coverage of the incident... At the same time, look out for and prevent the spread of the practice of circumventing the wall and the dissemination of other harmful technical information.'¹⁶⁷ Since messages posted on Tsai's Facebook page by Chinese netizens were in line with the CCP's attitude towards Taiwan, the party-state certainly approve this campaign albeit with the momentum carefully kept under control.

3.9. Efficacy and Limits of Internet Commentators

Although deploying Internet commentators has become a well-developed strategy across Chinese government offices, it is difficult to give a comprehensive and objective assessment of their efficacy. Some local governments have publicized their 'achievements' in detail. Jiaozuo police department in Henan province, for instance, saw a successful case which involved a local resident who criticized the police on a website after being fined for a traffic offence. His comment was picked up by a police Internet commentator within ten minutes and referred to the authorities. The police department mobilized more than 120 people to participate in the debate with pro-government comments, and eventually swayed public opinion towards the authorities. Many netizens, according to the government, began to condemn the person who criticized the police in the first place (Bristow 2008).

An Internet commentator from a municipal Internet propaganda office reveals a 'successful' case of public opinion guidance in 2010.¹⁶⁸ The security forces were accused of using excessive violence against local residents during a forced demolition, which sparked outcry among the public, netizens in particular. The Propaganda Department was asked to calm down public anger by posting online updates on the progress of the investigation regarding the allegedly unlawful demolition, and by mobilizing Internet commentators to praise the government's response and to publish positive comments in order to 'steer public opinion in the correct direction.' According to the Internet commentator, the incident was pacified within a week due to their effort.

The Supreme People's Court in Beijing openly recognised an Internet commentator of the Lianzhou People's Court in Guangdong for her outstanding performance during the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) held in Beijing. According to a report published by Lianzhou People's Court, Zhou devoted her own time posting 'positive' comments on major online forums, including Xinhua and RenRen, guiding the public to better understand the spirit of

166Sidney Leng. 2016. 'Taiwan president-elect Tsai Ing-wen's Facebook page bombarded with comments attacking any move by island towards independence,' South China Morning Post, 21 January. <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1903627/taiwan-president-elect-tsai-ing-wens-facebook-page> (accessed 22 January 2016)

167China Digital Times. 2016. 'Minitrue: Trolling Tsai Ing-wen Beyond the Great Firewall,' 22 January. <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2016/01/minitrue-trolling-tsai-ing-wen-beyond-great-firewall/> (accessed 23 January 2016)

168 Ai Weiwei. 2012. 'Ai Weiwei's interview with Internet commentator X.'

NPC and CPPCC, and consequently 'cultivated a favourable online public opinion environment' for the approval of the annual report of the Supreme People's Court by the NPC and CPPCC.¹⁶⁹

There are qualitative measurements of the work of Internet commentators. The Discipline Inspection Committee in Shangcheng county published 418 online commentaries between 2009 and 2012, with 60 pieces shared on the major national forums and websites, including People's Online and Xinhua Net.¹⁷⁰ Internet commentators at the Discipline Inspection Committee in Shanxi province published more than 5,200 commentaries since 2010, including 1,570 on the key websites in the capital Xi'an.¹⁷¹ Nonetheless, the quality or the impact of those commentaries is difficult to assess.

While local government have been keen to boost the achievements of their Internet commentators, China's scholars and state media have revealed counter-productive examples of the effects of using Internet commentators in steering public opinion. One of these took place in Shandong province, where a netizen named 'Baizhantang 123' exposed the scandal of how Tengzhou municipal government built a luxury office building, and he was subsequently arrested by the police in June 2007. The arrest was considered outrageous by netizens, and Tengzhou government were overwhelmed by criticism on the Internet. The incident was referred to the provincial propaganda department and with orders from the top officials, Xinhua Net and other major websites deleted protesters' anti-government comments and posts. As the netizens were further irritated by the party-state's response, the Tengzhou propaganda department organised a group of five Internet commentators to clarify the government's position, but with little success. The Internet commentator team was quickly expanded to ten government employees, and part-time commentators among local residents were also mobilised. Nonetheless, their efforts failed to pacify public anger. An official from the Tengzhou municipal propaganda department admitted that their capability to influence public opinion was insignificant in the face of the power of the hundreds of millions of Internet users in China (Chen and Li 2009).

The second example is the 2008 Weng'an riot in Guizhou province, where thousands of local residents took to the street in protest of an alleged police cover-up of a girl's death. The protest enjoyed massive support from the netizens and prompted Weng'an county officials to assign more than a dozen Internet commentators to closely monitor online media and post pro-government comments. Five Internet commentators were selected from the propaganda departments of every county and city of the prefecture to join in the efforts of steering public opinion towards support for the government (Chen and Li 2009). Nevertheless, the intervention of the Internet commentators failed to reverse anti-government sentiment as public opinion was overwhelmingly supporting the protesters, with all major online forums and chatrooms in China including threads and comments criticizing the CCP. The police chief of Weng'an county was subsequently dismissed for mishandling the initial protest.

169 Lianzhou People's Court. 2012. 'Liangzhou renmin fayuan wangluo pinglun yuan huo zuigaofa tongbao biaoyang (Lianzhou People's Court Internet commentator recognized by the Supreme Court),' 8 May <http://www.lianzhou.gov.cn/info/8577> (accessed 7 November 2014)

170 People's Daily Online. 2012. 'Zhengque yindao wangluo yulun (Guiding online public opinion correctly),' 20 March. <http://yuqing.people.com.cn/GB/212539/17441007.html> (accessed 13 November 2014)

171 Propaganda Department of Shanxi province. 2012. 'Jiaqiang wangluo xuanchuan daji fubai (Boosting Internet propaganda on anti-corruption),' 18 April. http://www1.qinfeng.gov.cn/admin/pub_journalshow.asp?id=104628&chid=100075 (accessed 13 November 2014)

In most government offices, the secrecy of the true identity of their Internet commentators is required. Explaining the rationale of using false IDs, an Internet commentator from a municipal propaganda department argues that the 'exposure of your true identity will bring a negative impact on the government's image. You lose the credibility from the public once they realise you are paid to speak for the authorities.'¹⁷² Since Internet commentators use false identification when posting comments, the public tend to treat comments with pro-government views as the propaganda work of the authorities and dismiss them. As Yang (2009) argues, Internet commentators have earned themselves 'a bad name' due to the deceptive role they play in the cyberspace.

Another factor that might undermine the significance of Internet commentators in directing public opinion is the rapid development of Weibo. With more than 300 million Weibo users, the influence of this new social media on netizens is enormous. As Weibo is yet to be widely included into the monitoring list of Internet commentators, incidents originally brought up on Weibo are likely to be overlooked by them. Given that every individual user is able to upload information in real time which can be forwarded by a vast number of followers, it is challenging for Internet commentators to sway netizen opinion in these cases. Furthermore, requirements from the Beijing Municipal Government asking Weibo users to register with their real identities may expose the true identity of Internet commentators. While this new regulation currently applies to Beijing only, it will surely pose a threat to the Internet commentator mechanism if it becomes a nationwide policy. As China's netizens have moved to Weibo as their preferred platform to express opinion, the CCP has begun to shift their attention to this new social media. I examine this move in detail in the chapter on Weibo and official digital policy.

3.10. Conclusion

Prior to the arrival of the Internet, the CCP could manipulate public opinion through the domination of mass media. However, the Internet brings a new dimension and challenges to the party-state in manufacturing consent. It is more difficult for the media or the state to exert absolute control over public opinion due to the diversification of the information flow. In the early days of Chinese social media, the Bulletin Boards System (BBS) and online forums were the most popular Internet platforms used by netizens. Young and active Internet users gathered through online communities to exchange ideas and information, and to express their opinions on social issues and political situations.

An increasing number of protests and public incidents was organised with the aid of the Internet, e-mail, BBS, online forums, blogs, and other social media. In addition to the traditional methods of limiting public communication that involve blocking, deleting, and censoring, the party-state introduced the use of Internet commentators as a mechanism to proactively sway public opinion in favour of the government. The earliest reported case of the establishment of Internet commentator groups was in 2004, when the CCP's Changsha Municipal Committee first hired a team of Internet commentators. Those commentators were allegedly paid 50 Chinese cents for each pro-government comment posted, which is believed to be

¹⁷²Ai Weiwei. 2012. 'Ai Weiwei's interview with Internet commentator X.'

the origin of the term '50 Cent Party' (*wu mao dang*). Whomever speaks for the party-state and expresses pro-government views is labelled as part of the '50 Cent Party.'

I examined government documents and found that official Internet commentators are mostly government employees or party officials who were assigned to the task alongside their routine duty, instead of being ordinary citizens. In regards to rewards, Internet commentators do not necessarily receive 50 Chinese cents for every pro-government comment post. Their actual financial rewards range from 50 cents per post to 2,000 yuan per month. Meanwhile, Internet commentators have a clear workflow. The procedure runs as follows: monitor the Internet; collect information regarding public opinion; analyse a given situation; report to the superior; and take steps to guide or correct public opinion to match the government's policy.

Although Government departments are proud of the achievements of their Internet commentators, it is difficult to offer a comprehensive and objective assessment of their efficacy as they operate covertly. On President Xi's online message board, *Xi dada jiyayou*, 20% of the comments were repetitive, overwhelmingly glorifying Xi, and were left by anonymous users, which indicates that it might be the work of Internet commentators. In the Tianjin explosion case, some of the commentators posted identical pro-government messages via different accounts. Both cases show signs that point to the work of Internet commentators.

In addition to government commentators, a group of non-state Internet commentators has emerged, which consists of ordinary netizens who voluntarily post pro-government messages. Since those volunteers willingly speak for the government without asking for a reward of 50 cents, they are labelled as '*zi gan wu*' (*zidai ganliang de wumao*—50 Cent Party who brings their own dried food). The well organised flooding of Facebook with anti-Taiwanese independence messages by the 'Voluntary 50 Cent Party' demonstrates the capability of this 'auxiliary force.'

Nathan (2003) identifies input institution as an important source of authoritarian resilience. China's censorship apparatus can be seen as one of the state's input institutions—an important source of authoritarian resilience. Of the five proactive propaganda strategies I identified—Internet commentators, government Weibo, e-government, government online message boards, and state-sponsored search engines—the deployment of Internet commentators demonstrates the CCP's willingness of to going beyond old-fashioned censorship. This has expanded the scope of an input institution, which I considered consider as part of 'authoritarian resilience 2.0'.

The use of Internet commentators is also among the earliest adaptive Internet propaganda strategies introduced by the party-state to sway public opinion in the cyberspace. In fact, it is only the starting point of the CCP's adaptive approach in resilient authoritarianism. As Internet users shift their preferences to emerging social media, such as Weibo and WeChat, the CCP followed suit by setting up official accounts on these new platforms. This in itself supports my argument that the Chinese party-state's Internet propaganda strategies are highly adaptive. As my other empirical chapters have demonstrated, by using Internet technology innovatively, such as by incorporating online propaganda strategies into making the

government more responsive, building a strong Internet power (*wangluo qianguo*), and defending cyber sovereignty, the Chinese government has moved beyond censorship and even propaganda.

4. Chapter Four: *e-government*

4.1. Introduction

The theory of resilient authoritarianism shows that China's political system is capable of enhancing the state's capacity via institutional adaptations and policy adjustments. This thesis suggests that government Weibo, government online message boards, and e-government are all part of an *wangluo wenzheng* (e-governance) initiative that is structured to foster better interaction between the state and society. It shows the authorities' capability of adapt and change in accordance with ICT development in order to stay in power.

In the previous chapter, I examined the deployment of Internet commentators as an innovative way to sway online public opinion. The next three chapter will study how e-government, government Weibo, and online message boards serve to promote *wangluo wenzheng* (e-governance), which consists of the ideas of e-participation, e-consultation, and e-scrutiny. The role of e-government is to improve government efficiency and services for its citizens, employees, businesses and agencies with the help of information technologies (Carter and Bélanger 2005). e-governance consists of the use of ICT to support public services, government administration, democratic processes, as well as relationships between citizens, civil society, the private sector, and the state (Dawes 2008). As e-governance allows governments to provide online services year round by circumventing the public's need to visit government offices in person, it is considered a leap forward in public management with the potential to transform the relationship between government and citizens in a positive way (Saxena 2005).

The promotion of e-governance offers a new opportunity to bridge the gap between state and society, which may fostering a closer relationship between them. Prior to the Internet age, the general public had very few channels to contact the state or individual officials directly. In recent years, Chinese officials have been urged to use Internet platforms, including government portals, to interact with the public, provide e-services, and consult public opinion. The United Nations E-Government Survey 2016 highlights a positive global trend towards higher levels of e-government development among its member states. It notes that countries in all regions, including China, are increasingly embracing innovation and utilizing ICTs to deliver services and engage people in decision-making processes.

In Asia, Singapore and South Korea are among the top five countries of in terms of implementing e-government.¹⁷³ For instance, South Korea continues to implement its new vision of 'Government 3.0,' placing emphasis on openness, sharing, communication and collaboration. Government institutions in South Korea made make extensive use of Twitter in their daily interactions with citizens. Since the early 1980s, the Singapore government has been taking advantage of ICT to transform public service. Its approach, however, was predominantly focused on delivering information to the public instead of fostering interaction between the state and citizens.¹⁷⁴ Not a UN member state, Taiwan ranks No. 10 on e-

¹⁷³United Nations E-Government Survey 2016. <http://workspace.unpan.org/> (accessed 23 January 2017)

¹⁷⁴Centre for Public Impact. 2016. 'Building a digital government in Singapore', April

12. <https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/case-study/building-digital-government-singapore/> (accessed 20 February 2017)

government implementation in another survey, on par with the UK¹⁷⁵. Taiwan's 'e-government 2011-2016' includes one-stop end-to-end government service, mobile e-government, government cloud application service etc.¹⁷⁶

Compared with its neighbours, China's overall e-government implementation does not perform as well as those countries. Nonetheless, China ranked 22nd in e-participation according to the UN E-Government Survey 2016. The United Nations acknowledges that the Chinese government has made special efforts to leverage the Internet and online services for public service delivery. Innovative measures in China underscore the prominence of ICT as a national priority, including the government's goal of growing e-commerce and the use of social media in citizen engagement.

In order to advocate the use of information technologies in public sectors, the Chinese authorities has introduced various projects and regulations, such as the Government Online Project and the Open Government Information Initiative, at all levels of government since the early 1990s. As early as 2002, the National Informatisation Leading Group made it clear that the construction of e-governance must be closely integrated with the transformation of government functions and with the structural reform of government administration bodies. According to the authorities, it has to be designed as a service according to the needs of the government's workings and the public's demands.¹⁷⁷

The latest example of Internet technology being used to advance e-governance was the initiative 'Internet Plus government services' (*hulianwang + zhengwu wufu*) advocated in the 2016 Report on the Work of the Government.¹⁷⁸ The campaign aims to make government operations more open, responsive to social concerns in a timely manner, and capable to provide official information.¹⁷⁹ Due to the active promotion from the central government, 100% of departments and government offices at the central, provincial and municipal level, and 83% at the county level had set up official websites by the end of 2015.¹⁸⁰ Portals of central and provincial governments serve as windows showcasing the work of the state, 'an important part of the construction of e-government' and 'a channel to interact with the public' that plays a significant role in promoting government openness and public accountability.¹⁸¹ These portals offer the public a channel for e-consultation, e-participation, and e-scrutiny. While e-government focuses on delivering government services to the citizens, e-governance involves an element of interaction between the state and the public. In that respect, the functions of Chinese government portals have moved beyond propaganda, not only offering e-government services, but also e-governance.

175Yeung, Edwin. 2016. 'Taiwan ranks No. 10 in e-government implementation: Waseda Univ. survey,' The China Post, August 18 <http://www.chinapost.com.tw/taiwan/national/national-news/2016/08/18/475805/taiwan-ranks.htm> (accessed 23 January 2017)

176National Development Council. 2014. 'E-Government Program of Taiwan 2011-2016', December 8. <https://www.ndc.gov.tw/en/News2.aspx?n=8C362E80B990A55C&sms=1DB6C6A8871CA043> (accessed 23 January 2017)

177National Informatisation Leading Group. 2002. 'Guojia xinxihua lingdao xiaozu guanyu woguo dianzi zhengwu zhidao yijian (National Informatisation Leading Group on the Development of E-Government Affairs in China)'. 5 August.

178Cyberspace Administration of China. 2016. 'Hulianwang + zhengwu wufu yinling wufu xin moshi (Internet plus government services leads new way of governance),' 8 March. http://www.cac.gov.cn/2016-03/08/c_1118270427.htm (accessed 18 March 2016)

179Ibid.

180Ibid.

181About Us, Central Government portal. http://www.gov.cn/foot/2014-05/19/content_2681922.htm (accessed 28 March 2015).

This chapter consists of two parts. The first part begins with a review of the notions of e-government and e-governance in scholarship, before moving to examine the historical development of e-government in China. The second part of this chapter presents empirical studies of the central government portal and 31 provincial portals, which I will examine in relation to the following functions: a) provide useful information; b) offer e-services; c) increase transparency and openness; and d) engage the public. The last section of this chapter discusses the performance of provincial and central government portals.

4.2. Methodology

For the empirical research of provincial and central government portals, I adopted Lollar's (2006) analytical framework with minor revisions in methodology. Lollar (2006) only included 29 provinces in her study, with Ningxia and Shangdong missing, while I included the government websites of all 31 provinces,¹⁸² a list of which can be found on China's central government portal.¹⁸³ The same analytical framework was used to study the development of the central government portal between 2005 and 2014. This enabled me to draw an additional comparison between e-government services on provincial and central government portals. In order to gain access to the central government portal in 2005, I used a digital archive called 'Wayback Machine,' which enables users to see archived versions of webpages across time.

Seeking to find out if e-government encourages government transparency in China, increases information flow, improves efficiency, and enhances citizens' political participation, Lollar (2006) examines provincial government portals. She concludes that although e-government in China has played a significant role in improving government transparency and citizen outreach, it contributes little to providing a balanced source of information and to delivering efficient services. Her study was published in February 2006. Given the rapid development of ICT, the fast growth of China's Internet user numbers and the progressive advocacy of the Government Online Project by the party-state in the past decade, her findings require a review. It is important to re-examine provincial government portals to see if any changes occurred in state transparency, efficiency and citizens' political participation since the opening of online communication between the state and society.

4.3. e-government and e-governance Literature on China

The existing literature on e-government and e-governance mostly focuses on non-authoritarian states. As we will see in the following section, many of the discussions regarding the functions of e-government and e-governance are closely related to what the Chinese party-state has been advocating—*wangluo wenzheng*—promoting e-consultation, e-participation, and e-scrutiny. Zhang (2002) attempts to understand how e-government works in a non-liberal democratic polity by examining how it is pursued in

¹⁸²The 31 'provinces' include five autonomous regions and four municipalities (Beijing, Chongqing, Shanghai and Tianjin) directly under the jurisdiction of the central government. They all enjoy provincial administrative status.

¹⁸³The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China. <http://www.gov.cn/>.

China. Zhang (2002: 176) compares the external links on the front pages of the government websites of China, the US, Taiwan and Singapore that 'reflect the agenda and motivation of the website-maker.' Five categories are identified: 1) service-oriented links that connect to government agencies and other useful information; 2) communication-oriented links which contain feedback email boxes and polls for netizens; 3) business-oriented links that provide information related to commercial and economic activities, and advertisements; 4) agenda-setting links directing users to information that enhances the party-state's image and; 5) administration-oriented links that offer informational insight into the workings of the government, such as the public procurement system. The study suggests that, compared with the US, Singapore, and Taiwan, the Chinese government website places great emphasis on the state's agenda-setting role.

When studying e-government developments in non-democratic countries, such as China, scholars tend to look at its political impact on democracy (Lollar 2006) and treat the CCP's e-government strategy with skepticism. Enhancing government performance, reducing tension between the state and society, and fostering economic growth via the promotion of e-government can be considered a 'proactive strategy' (Kalashil and Boas 2001). Zhou (2004) argues that since the Chinese government own the largest resources of information in the country, the party-state is best positioned to release information favourable to it via the promotion of e-knowledge. Tang (2000) suggests that a primary function of e-governance in China is to build and strengthen government-to-citizen connections, through features such as online forums.

Johnson and Kolko (2010) argue that propaganda, or state agenda-setting, is the primary purpose of e-government websites in non-democratic regimes. Zhang (2002: 176) suggests that one of the most common functions of government web portals in China is to provide agenda-setting information which aims to guide and influence the public by including news that may improve the state's image. Wong and Welch (2004) worry that instead of promoting better accountability of the party-state, the new government-citizen interface emerging under e-government could be used by the CCP as an additional channel for further propaganda and control. Kluver (2005) provides a more critical argument by suggesting that the purpose of e-government initiatives in China is not to empower the public, but to 're-establish the control of the governing authorities, including improving the quality of surveillance and data gathering, and hence policy-making, the elimination of corruption, and ultimately, the re-legitimation of the Communist Party of China.'

Jiang and Xu (2009) finds that while enhancing government legitimacy, propaganda, surveillance and censorship, some provincial governments' portals simultaneously encourage citizen political participation. They analyse web features on 31 Chinese provincial government portals and examine the implications for citizen political participation. By revising the e-participation framework used by the United Nations (UNPAN 2006) in assessing the effectiveness of national government websites to engage citizens in public affairs globally, they identified and evaluated 20 types of online structures through which Chinese citizens interact with provincial governments. However, the authors stop short of suggesting that the Chinese government is heading rapidly towards democracy. Rather, such manifestations of official care for the average citizen are merely the party-state's 'strategic adaptation in an online environment' (Jiang

and Xu 2009: 191). One of the main debates among scholars about the use of the Internet in China is whether it will create an environment that fosters democratic behaviour. As we saw above, scholars based in the West tend to look at e-government in China within the same framework.

Instead of focusing on propaganda and aspects of state control, many Chinese scholars based in mainland China study the CCP's e-government strategies from other perspectives such as public administration, government management, and information technologies (Cai 2005, Chen 2003, Shao 2009, Shuo et al 2002, Sun G 2013, Sun and Liu 2008, Sun and Wang 2012, Wang Y 2003, Wang H 2011, Wang et al 2013, Zhang 2000, Zhao 2004). Sun and Wang (2012) and Wang et. al. (2013) study how information technology affects the implementation of e-government in China. e-government allows for a better communication between different government departments, roundly improving the dialogue mechanisms between citizens and state, and facilitating the transformation of society from government-centric to service-centric (Shuo et al 2002).

The goal of e-government is to innovate government management, to improve government services, and to enhance the government's image Wang (2011). Likewise, Zhang (2000) also believes that e-government is promoted in order to innovate governance and public services with the help of information technology. He argues that it becomes a virtue of government by offering convenient, fast and good public services for citizens, with the potential to increase state capacity and efficiency, as well as to improve the policy making process. By doing so, it may lead to an open and accountable government.

Examining the development of e-government in China, Shao (2009) identifies several issues surrounding its implementation, such as the lack of unified planning from the top, laws and regulations that are lagging behind the development of the ICT, and a poor understanding of information safety. As an integral part of the informatisation and automatisisation of government administration, e-government is important to the efficiency, transparency, and accuracy of government workings (Zhao 2004). Sun G. (2013) speaks of the need to build an effective e-government that caters to public demand, and promotes a synchronous transformation and development of the economy, society, and government in China. Contrary to their counterparts in the West, Chinese scholars based in China avoid politically sensitive issues such as democracy and e-participation. Western literature only looks at e-government from the perspective of democracy, whereas Chinese literature uses an e-government implementation angle. Both sides show limitations in understanding the complexity of the issue by failing to provide a full picture which takes into account implications beyond democracy uniquely or utilitarian implementation.

4.4. e-government in China

For the Chinese party-state, ICT is not simply a tool for carrying out propaganda, but could also be useful in promoting better governance. Indeed, using the Internet to advocate *wangluo wenzheng* (e-governance) is not a new concept, as it has been making use of ICT prior to the Internet age, in the 1990s. As the following section shows, the party-state is willing to adopt new technologies to advance the

government's works. The Chinese government promoted the use of information technologies in government and governance as early as the 1970s. The development of e-government in China can be categorised in four consecutive stages: 1) computers become part of the work undertaken by the government; 2) the informatisation of government structures; 3) e-government and; 4) transition to e-governance.¹⁸⁴ These stages evolved alongside the development of Internet technologies. As the latter became more advanced, e-government strategies also became more sophisticated.

In the first stage (1970s), computers were introduced as technical support to the work practices of the government. The earliest proposal involving the use of computer technology in China's government was made in 1973 by Premier Zhou Enlai, who ordered the State Council to 'progressively advocate the application of electronic computers.'¹⁸⁵ This marked the very first step in China's government informatisation initiative.¹⁸⁶ Computers at this stage were mostly used for data processing. One of the most significant examples was the national census conducted in 1979, when for the first time the Computer Center of the National Planning Committee processed data with the help of computers.¹⁸⁷

In the second stage (1980s), information technologies went from being present to being promoted in the government. As central processing units became smaller and cheaper, personal computers (PCs) became more popular and affordable. This technology development allowed PCs as well as information systems to be installed in government sectors. In line with China's economic reform in the 1980s, the government's initial informatisation efforts were focused on economic areas through the establishment of the National Economic Information Centre in 1987 (renamed to National Information Centre the following year).¹⁸⁸ Key government departments, mostly those related to economic development, such as finance, customs, railway, and electricity, established offices in charge of informatisation,¹⁸⁹ which made possible the information sharing between different departments. Ever since, the State Council has been in charge of drafting the blue prints, overall regulations, policies and standards for e-government initiatives (Xu and Yang 2002). The establishment of government information systems paved the way for the introduction of e-government.

The third stage (1990s) saw the beginning of the building of e-government across China, which echoed the development of Internet technologies across the world. In 1992, the State Council asked governments at all levels to build an office automation system that would include the purchase of computers for office work, and a requirement to equip civil servants with computer skills through formal training. As China connected to the Internet for the first time in 1994, the government launched *Three Golden Projects* in a top-down initiative to construct sophisticated information networks across the country. The *Three Golden Projects* comprise the *Golden Bridge Project* (responsible for the design and implementation of an

184Yang (2014) suggests three stages, while the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology classified the history of governmental informatisation in five stages (MIIT 2013).

185Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT). 2013. *Dianzi zhengwu yu gonggong fuwu: zhongguo xinxihua fazhan baogao 2012 (E-government & Public Services: China informatisation Development Report 2012)*. Beijing: Publishing House of Electronics Industry. p.1.

186Zhongguo dianzi zhengwu fazhan baogao (*Report on the Development of China's e-government*). Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2003. Available on <http://www.china.com.cn/chinese/zhuanti/dzzwbg/490868.html> (accessed 21 March 2015)

187China e-government Forum. 2011. 'Zhou Hongren: Zhongguo dianzi zhengfu fazzhan de huigu he zhanwang (Zhou Hongren: review and outlook of China's e-government development)'. May 27. <http://www.itgov.org.cn/Item/2987.aspx> (accessed 15 March 2015)

188MIIT 2013.

189MIIT 2013, p.2.

Internet services infrastructure covering the entire country), the *Golden Card Project* (tasked with building a national electronic payment network), and the *Golden Custom Project* (responsible for linking customs points through a national electronic data interchange system in order to enhance export/import management functions).¹⁹⁰ An additional *Government Online Project* was introduced in 1999 with the aim to encourage state departments at all levels to adopt online communication as a primary policy-making and guidance channel. By May 1999, there were 1,470 government websites registered under the domain 'gov.cn'.¹⁹¹

The fourth stage (2000s to present) saw the further consolidation of e-government design as well as an attempt to transition from e-government to e-governance. Following policies carried out in the first three stages, long term plans at the macro level were formulated during this latter phase. A five-year plan (2001-2005) for the construction of China's national e-government and informatisation was announced in 2001,¹⁹² in respect of which the former Premier Zhou Rongji stated that the promotion of e-government, the vigorous development of the software industry, and the development and utilisation of information resources, as well as an accelerated development of e-commerce are among China's priorities.¹⁹³ In the Tenth Five-Year Plan for National Economy and Social Development (2001–2005), the importance of government informatisation and e-government were emphasised (Ma et al 2005, MIIT 2013: 3-5). In addition to the five-year plan, the National Informatisation Leading Group, which comprised top CCP officials, passed 'Document Number 17' in 2002, which for the first time gave detailed guidelines regarding the comprehensive implementation of e-government nationwide.¹⁹⁴

The head of the National Informatisation Leading Group, Premier Wen Jiabao, emphasised during the symposium on national e-government works in 2006 the need to speed up the construction of e-government processes.¹⁹⁵ The Leading Group focus on several key areas in the promotion of e-government which include, among others, a) further extending the scope of Open Government Information, b) increasing the connections between different e-government systems with a view to better information sharing and coordination, c) establishing a nation-wide and unified e-government network, d) strengthening information security, and e) talent training.¹⁹⁶

In March 2006, the National People's Congress reviewed and adopted the Outline of the 11th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development, which envisaged a speedier integration of the networks of telecommunication, radio, television and the Internet, to build the 'next-generation Internet'.¹⁹⁷ According to the 11th Five-Year Plan, a nation-wide and standardised e-government network was to be

190For more details, see MIIT 2013 and Zhongguo Wang (China Net). 2003. 'Zhengfu Xinxihua Dashiji (Government informatisation Memorabilia)' State Council Information Office. <http://www.china.com.cn/chinese/zhuanti/283818.htm> (accessed 20 January 2015).

191Zhongguo Wang (China Net) 2003.

192General Office of the People's Government of Beijing Municipality. 2001. 'Quanguo zhengfu xitong xinxihua jianshe 2001-2005 nian guihua gangyao (Guideline for the construction of China's national e-government and informatisation)'. 30 May. <http://govfile.beijing.gov.cn/Govfile/ShowNewPageServlet?id=4376> (accessed 19 December 2014).

193Zhou Rongji. 2001. 'Guanyu guomin jingji he shehui fazhan di shige wunian jihua gangyao de baogao (Report on the Tenth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development)'. March 5. CCP News. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64184/64186/66689/4494469.html> (accessed 20 March 2015).

194Zhongguo Wang (China Net) 2003.

195People's Daily Online, 2006. 'Quanguo dianzi zhengwu gongzuo zuotanhui zhaokai (The opening of symposium on national e-government works)'. June 13. <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1024/4465297.html> (accessed 20 March 2015).

196Ibid.

197Xinhua News. 2006. 'Guomin he shehui fazhan di shiyige wunian jihua gangyao (Outline of the 11th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development)'. March 16. http://www.gov.cn/ztl/2006-03/16/content_228841_4.html (accessed 20 March 2015).

completed by 2010, with 50% of administrative licensing work to be done online.¹⁹⁸ In the meantime, the 'National Informatisation Development Strategy 2006-2020' clearly stated four main tasks for e-government, in order of priority: improve public services, enhance social administration, strengthen comprehensive supervision, and perfect macro management.¹⁹⁹ This development strategy, together with the launch of the central government's portal (www.gov.cn), was regarded as the key feature in the transition of e-government from administration-oriented to service-oriented (MIIT 2013).

In 2007, the State Council adopted regulations that require government offices at each administrative level to disclose government information, catalogues and annual reports as qualification to the Open Government Information. Article 15 of the regulations require that 'government agencies should take the initiative to disclose government information, which should be disclosed by means of government gazettes, government websites and press conferences, as well as through newspapers and magazines, radio, television and other methods that make it convenient for the public to be informed'.²⁰⁰ According to the government, the purposes of the open information initiative are to enhance the transparency of the work of government and to fully utilise government information to 'serve the people's production and livelihood and their economic and social activities'.²⁰¹

As a result of the active promotion of the Government Online Projects, the vast majority of local governments set up portals that enable citizens to contact the government via email. By the end of 2009, there were more than 45,000 government portals, including 75 central and state bodies, 31 provincial governments, 333 prefectural governments, and over 80% county-level governments.²⁰² The numbers have been growing due to the active promotion of the campaign by the central government. Since the establishment of the Central Leading Group for Internet Security and Informatisation in 2014, eight documents were issued to guide the construction of party and government websites.²⁰³ At the end of 2015, 100% of departments and government offices at the central, provincial, and municipal level, and 83% at the county level had set up official websites.²⁰⁴ This continued development can be seen as an indicator of the party-state's determination to promote e-government.

Further evidence of Internet technology being used to advance governance is Premier Li's mention, for the first time, of the concept of 'Internet Plus government services' (*hulianwang + zhengwu wufu*) in the 2016 Report on the Work of the Government.²⁰⁵ He promised in the report that the government would push forward the 'Internet Plus government services model and promote better information sharing

198People's Daily Online, 2006. 'Quanguo dianzi zhengwu gongzuo zuotanhui zhaokai (The opening of symposium on national e-government works)'. June 13. <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1024/4465297.html> (accessed 20 March 2015).

199General Office of the CCP Central Committee and General Office of the State Council. 2006. 'National informatisation Development Strategy 2006-2020'. 19 March. http://big5.gov.cn/gate/big5/www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2006/content_315999.htm (accessed 19 December 2014).

200Information Office of the State Council. 2010. 'The Internet in China White Paper'. June 8. http://www.gov.cn/english/2010-06/08/content_1622956_2.html (accessed 18 March 2015).

201The State Council. 2007. Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Open Government Information. Available at http://www.gov.cn/zwqk/2007-04/24/content_592937.htm (accessed 30 December 2014).

202Information Office of the State Council. 2010. 'The Internet in China White Paper'. June 8. http://www.gov.cn/english/2010-06/08/content_1622956_2.htm (accessed 18 March 2015).

203State Information Centre. 2016. '2015 Zhongguo dianzi zhengwu fazhan gaikuang (China's e-government report 2015)'. 18 March. <http://www.sic.gov.cn/archiver/SIC/UpFile/Files/HtmlEditor/201603/20160323163523850.pdf> (accessed 28 March 2016).

204Ibid.

205Cyberspace Administration of China. 2016. 'Hulianwang + zhengwu wufu yinling wufu xin moshi (Internet plus government services leads new way of governance)', 8 March. http://www.cac.gov.cn/2016-03/08/c_1118270427.htm (accessed 18 March 2016)

between government departments, and simplify procedures when accessing e-services.²⁰⁶ The report also pledged to strengthen efforts to make government operations more open via the Internet, and to respond in a timely manner to social concerns, as well as to inform the public about what the government is doing and how.²⁰⁷ In fact, 'Internet Plus' (*hulianwang+*) was first presented by Li when delivering the government work report in 2015. Designed for fuelling economic growth, 'Internet Plus' intends to integrate mobile Internet, cloud computing, big data and the Internet of Things with modern manufacturing, to encourage the development of e-commerce, Internet banking, and to help Internet companies increase their international presence.²⁰⁸ From 'Internet Plus' to 'Internet Plus government services,' the transition shows the party-state's willingness to explore the full potential of Internet technology not only for propaganda, but also to provide e-services and to advance e-governance.

4.5. Assessing Provincial Government Portals

Government portals, be they representative of a central government or local government, serve as a platform providing e-governance functions. As early as 2002, the National Informatisation Leading Group made it clear that the construction of e-governance must be closely integrated with the transformation of government functions and with the structural reforms of government administration bodies. e-governance thus has to be designed as a service according to the needs of the government's workings and the public's demands.²⁰⁹ Deputy Primer and Deputy Director of the National Informatisation Leading Group, Zeng Peiyan, suggests that e-governance plays a significant role in enhancing government management, transforming government functions, increasing efficiency, and improving the convenience of people's interactions with official bodies.²¹⁰ Premier Li also pointed out that the Internet serves as a new platform to govern, a process helped by the e-governance system by providing online services, promoting a better connection and interaction between the government and the public, as well as by ensuring that the exercise of power occurs in an orderly and efficient manner.²¹¹

In order to assess the performance of e-governance structures, I examined 31 provincial portals and the central government portal. This section begins with provincial portals, which were assessed according to four different criteria:

1. *Information.* Does the website contain government documents, laws and regulations; news; links to other departments in the province as well as other agencies; links to other news websites, and search functions within the website?²¹²

206□ Gov.cn. 2016. 'Full Text: Report on the Work of the Government (2016)' 17 March. http://english.gov.cn/premier/news/2016/03/17/content_281475309417987.htm (accessed 18 March 2016)

207□ Ibid.

208□ Gov.cn. 2015. 'China unveils Internet Plus action plan to fuel growth.' 4 July. http://english.gov.cn/policies/latest_releases/2015/07/04/content_281475140165588.htm (accessed 10 Feb 2016)

209National Informatisation Leading Group. 2002. 'Guojia xinxihua lingdao xiaozu guanyu woguo dianzi zhengwu zhidao yijian (National Informatisation Leading Group on the Development of E-Government Affairs in China)'. 5 August.

210Xinhua News. 2006. 'Wen Jiabao, Huang Ju zuo zhongyao pishi: jiakuai dianzi zhengwu jianshe (Wen Jiabao Huang Ju make important direction: speedup the construction of e-government)'. 12 June. http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2006-06/12/content_4685670.htm (accessed 13 February 2015)

211China National Radio. 2014. 'Li Keqiang zan dianzi zhengwu xitong (Li Keqiang praises e-government system)'. 20 November. http://china.cnr.cn/gdgg/201411/t20141120_516815253.shtml (accessed 18 March 2015)

2. *e-services*. Does the website provide a) executable e-services, such as paying taxes, replacing driving licenses; and b) guiding e-services, such as providing instructions on getting ID cards, marriage certificates, passports or downloading forms?
3. *Transparency and openness*. Does the website make the government more accountable by publishing a) data related to government project bidding, budget and procurement, and b) channels for netizens to report official misconduct?²¹³
4. *Citizen outreach and responsiveness of e-governments*. Does the website provide different channels, for example governor's mail box, online forums, hotline, opinion surveys, for the public to communicate with officials?

4.6. Findings on Provincial Government Portals

Comparing my study with Lollar's (2006) research, the most significant finding is that functions and e-services provided by provincial government portals in 2014 were much more comprehensive and sophisticated than a decade ago. I attribute this achievement to two main reasons. Firstly, Internet technology advanced hugely during the period of this research. Secondly, the Chinese government has been actively pushing the development of e-governance across all government and party offices. Of 19 indicators listed in four tables, 18 indicators in 2014 outperformed portal characteristics in 2005. Only one indicator, 'search within the site,' scored 100%, or maximum points, in my study and Lollar's. In general, the enhanced performance of government portals can be attributed to the advancement of Internet technology, as well as to the Chinese government's efforts to promote e-government in the last decade.

4.6.1. Information Provided by Provincial Government Portals

The first function of a government portal is to provide official information, such as government documents, laws and regulations, government news, and links to other departments and news websites. In addition, portals should also provide search functions within the website of the state entity they represent. Table 1 looks at information available on provincial portals, such as whether the website contains government documents, laws and regulations, news, links to other government departments and news websites, and search functions within the website. It shows 100% fulfilment in 'government documents,' 'search within the site,' 'government laws/ regulations,' and 'links to other agencies,' which means that all the portals examined in 2014 provide these types of information.

²¹²Lollar (2006) included 'subject area index' as one of the criteria. I replaced it with 'search within the site' as it gives users greater access to information.

²¹³Lollar (2006) included 'employment opportunities for civil service' and 'price index of major goods and services' in the evaluation list. I replaced these with government budget and procurement, which are more relevant in reflecting transparency.

These areas have always performed well, as we see similar marks of over 90% for the same criteria in Lollar's (2006) research. Portals offer a wide range of categories of government laws and regulations, for example Regulations on the Protection of Minors, Trial Procedures on Carbon Emission Administration, Regulations on the Administration of Rail Transport, Licensing for Water Drain and the Levying of Water Resource Fees, Disposal of Kitchen Waste, Measures on Domestic Animal, and Poultry Farming. As for government documents, the most common publication is the Report on the Work of the Government, which can be found on all portals. Others include papers related to the appointment of senior officials in the provinces, and to decisions made by the central government, such as State Council Releasing the 12th Five-year Development Plan for the Domestic Trade, or Guidelines for Environmental Protection in Foreign Investment and Cooperation released by the Ministry of Environmental Protection.

Table 1 shows that particular improvement was made in the provision of news, which reached a score of only 34% in previous studies. As news reading is one of the main purposes for netizens' use of the Internet, giving access to news through provincial websites can be said to meet users' needs in this respect. The websites of two provinces, Shandong and Sichuan, did not contain links to other news agencies and yet, this category performed much better than a decade ago, jumping from 57% to 94%. Interestingly, Table 1 shows the poor performance of audio and video clip uploads to government portals irrespective of the increasing popularity of video clips in China's mainstream social media and news websites including state media. Although the percentage of portals featuring this service increased from 10% to 58%, 13 provincial governments failed to make use of it. Among the laggards are Chongqing, Guangdong, and Zhejiang, three of the most advanced provinces in terms of infrastructure in China. Government portals are clearly behind their commercial counterparts, such as Sina and Tencent, which feature a wide range of audio and video materials.

Table 1. Information Provided by Provincial Government Portals

Province/ Metropolis	Gov't Documents	News	Search within the Portal	Gov't Laws/ Regulations	Links to Other Agencies	Links to News Media	Audio/ Video Clips
Beijing	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Tianjin	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Heibei	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Shanxi	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Neimenggu	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Liaoning	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Jilin	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Heilongjiang	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Shanghai	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Jiangsu	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Zhejiang	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Anhui	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Fujian	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Jiangxi	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

Shandong	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO
Henan	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Hubei	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Hunan	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Guangdong	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Guangxi	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Hainan	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Chongqing	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Sichuan	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES
Guizhou	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Yunnan	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Xizang (Tibet)	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Shaanxi	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Gansu	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Qinghai	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Ningxia	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Xinjiang	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Total (%)	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	94%	58%
Lollar (2006)	96%	34%	100%*	93%	96%	57%	10%

Table 1: Information Provided by Provincial Government Portals

* Lollar (2006) included 'subject area index' as one of the criteria assessed. I replaced it with 'search within the portal' as search functions give users greater access to information.

One of the roles of state-sponsored portals is to disseminate official messages and to portray a positive image of the government. Lollar (2006: 3) looked at news pieces featured on government portals and found that governments try to report favourably on government activities. My study also found that news stories featured on portal sties were mostly positive news. Examples of similar topics are Dali City's investment of 700 million yuan (70 million pound sterling) in environmental protection projects around Lake Er,²¹⁴ or improvements in the air quality ranking of Kunmin city, which rose to number 15 in China.²¹⁵ Besides positive stories, another major theme commonly found on portals relates to top officials' activities, such as the governor or mayor visiting factories, villages etc. In the event of natural disaster involving human casualties, the focus of the news turns to how the top officials handle direct rescue missions. The purpose of these positive stories is to portray a good image of the state and of individual officials. Meanwhile, fulfilling the traditional role of propaganda remains one of the main functions of government portals. For example, a news headline on the Zhejiang government website reads 'The Province Carries out Public Welfare Event to Learn from Lei Feng.'²¹⁶ Lei was an army soldier during Mao's period who was portrayed by the state media as selfless, modest, and devoted to the CCP.

214Yunan Net. 2014. 'Dali jinnian touru 7 yiyuan qidong erhai huanhu jiewu (Dali invests 700 million yuan this for environmental protection in Lake Er)'. 6 March. http://www.yn.gov.cn/yn_zwlanmu/yn_dfzw/201403/t20140306_13496.html (accessed 7 June 2014).

215Yunan Net. 2013. '10 yuefen kunmin kongqi zhiliang paiming shangshengzhi quanguo di 15 wei (Air quality ranking of Kunmin in October rises to number 15 in the country)'. 21 November. http://www.yn.gov.cn/yn_zwlanmu/yn_dfzw/201311/t20131121_12655.html (accessed 7 June 2014).

216Lei Feng was. Zhejiang Government News. 2015. 'The Province Carries out Public Welfare Event to Learn from Lei Feng'. 2 March' http://english.zj.gov.cn/art/2015/3/2/art_5798_1508427.html (accessed 2 March 2015).

Provinces that share borders with foreign countries may publish news reflecting their unique position. For instance, Heilongjiang province in Northeast China shares a border with Russia and shows a special section on its website dedicated to Sino-Russian trade. Generally speaking, compared to traditional news websites, including state media, news stories on government websites carry little news value for ordinary citizens. In fact, only about 12% of urban residents in China consider government websites to be their main source of information about the government.²¹⁷ Nonetheless, from the government's perspective it is necessary to focus on showcasing positive news on official websites. They are the equivalent of *the People's Daily* online, and act as a mouthpiece of the CCP. While most Chinese readers would not read them, they remain an important propaganda machine.

4.6.2. e-services Offered by Provincial Government Portals

The second function of government portal is to provide e-services. Table 2 evaluates e-services on provincial portals by looking at websites' content, specifically if they provide a) executable e-services, such as paying taxes and replacing driving licenses; and b) guidance e-services, such as instructions on receiving ID cards, marriage certificates, passports, or download forms. My research suggests that there was a remarkable improvement in the quality and quantity of e-services available on government websites in China between 2006 and 2014. In Lollar's (2006) study, only five portals (17% of the total) allowed users to receive access to online executable government services a decade ago, while only 83% of the overall number of portals gave information and guidance on state services. As we can see in Table 2, in 2014, all but two portals (96%) offered executable e-services, such as paying taxes and replacing driving licenses. 100% of portals provided guiding e-services, such as downloadable forms and instructions on getting ID cards, marriage certificates, and passports.

By reducing the cost of e-services and by allowing the public easier access to government websites, the development of the ICT was one of the main contributing forces that led to this improvement. Meanwhile, the Chinese central government has been an additional and essential actor that not only advocated for the adoption of e-services, but who actively pushed forward measures that facilitated their inclusion in the daily communication between state and citizens. In 2007, the State Council Informatisation Office issued a directive called 'Providing One Hundred Services Online,' that required government websites at each administrative level across the country, from provincial to municipal and county levels, to enhance the service functions of government websites.²¹⁸ Following the above directive, many local governments, such as Jiujiang in Jiangxi Province, focused on improving e-services in five areas of utmost concern to the public: education, health care, social security, transportation, and public utilities.²¹⁹

217China News Service. 2014. 'Govt websites see low usage by public'. 28 October. <http://www.ecns.cn/2014/10-28/140223.shtml> (accessed 10 March 2015).

218Zunyi Government. 2007. 'Guanyu zuohao zhengfu wangzhan 'bajian shishi wangshang ban'huodong de tongzhi (Announcing the implementation of the policy 'providing one hundred services online')'. 8 October. <http://plugins.zunyi.gov.cn/zfxgk/html/1/201106020001/2011/2011-002522.shtml> (accessed 6 June 2014).

219Jiujiang Government. 2007. Zunyi Government. 2007. 'Guanyu zuohao zhengfu wangzhan 'bajian shishi wangshang ban'huodong de tongzhi (Announcing the implementation of the policy 'providing one hundred services online')'. 25 September http://www.jiujiang.gov.cn/jjeg/jjeg_fgwj/jjeg_jj/201309/t20130906_952176.html (accessed 6 June 2014).

Table 2. e-services Offered by Provincial Portals

Province	Executable e-services	Guidance e-services
Beijing	YES	YES
Tianjin	YES	YES
Hebei	YES	YES
Shanxi	YES	YES
Neimenggu	YES	YES
Liaoning	YES	YES
Jilin	YES	YES
Heilongjiang	YES	YES
Shanghai	YES	YES
Jiangsu	YES	YES
Zhejiang	YES	YES
Anhui	YES	YES
Fujian	YES	YES
Jiangxi	YES	YES
Shandong	YES	YES
Henan	YES	YES
Hubei	YES	YES
Hunan	YES	YES
Guangdong	YES	YES
Guangxi	YES	YES
Hainan	YES	YES
Chongqing	YES	YES
Sichuan	YES	YES
Guizhou	YES	YES
Yunnan	YES	YES
Xizang (Tibet)	NO	YES
Shaanxi	YES	YES
Gansu	YES	YES
Qinghai	YES	YES
Ningxia	YES	YES
Xinjiang	NO	YES
Total (%)	96%	100%
Lollar (2006)*	17%	83%

Table 2: e-services Offered by Provincial Portals

*In Lollar's (2006) study, 5 out of 29 portals provided executable services, while 24 out of 29 provided guidance services.

Of all provincial portals, Beijing, the capital of China, and Shanghai, its financial centre, offer comprehensive executable e-services. For example, in Beijing online services are grouped into three

categories: online appointments, online applications, and online express services. The public can make appointments for marriage registrations, appointments with doctors, travel documents etc. Users can also file applications for resident permits, school examinations, replacing used vehicles, obtaining licenses for medical doctors, nurses, lawyers, or accountants. With regards to public utilities, citizens are given the option to reserve library books, and make online payments for electricity, gas, and water.²²⁰ As far as non-executable services are concerned, provincial portals also provide useful information that is relevant to citizens' daily life. For example, Hunan government offers advice to parents on how and where to choose schools; guidance on the procedures needed when adopting children; and property regulations for home buyers.²²¹

While increasing the number of e-service types available on their portals, some of the provinces, including Beijing, Guangdong, Hainan, Sichuan and Yunnan, also make it easier for people with disabilities to access electronic resources. Yunan province's portal, for example, provides large font sizes for users with serious vision impairment, as well as an audio assistant for blind people.²²²

6.1.3 Transparency and Openness on Provincial Portals

The third function of government portal concerns transparency and openness. Table 3 assesses the transparency and openness of provincial portals by looking at whether they publish data related to government project bidding, budget and procurement, as well as channels for netizens to report official misconduct. Compared with ten years ago, there were significant improvements marked by most of the indicators in 2014, which scored above 90%, while none of them reached 50% in Lollar's (2006) study. Table 3 shows that provinces were doing relatively well in publishing information about government budgets (97% of portals provide it) and procurement (94% of portals provide it) on their websites.²²³

As for bidding announcements, although we have seen an impressive increase in their number between Lollar's previous study (41%) and mine (81%), this category is underrepresented compared with others in the table. Some of the provinces created a separate page listing announcements of bidding information for provincial government projects.²²⁴ In some provinces, the Provincial Development and Reform Commission is responsible for making bidding information public. In one day in 2014, the Jiangxi Provincial Development and Reform Commission posted more than 20 bidding announcements. Although it is not clear if the provincial governments are obliged to announce every bidding and procurement project, the current practice demonstrates a certain degree of transparency and openness, as similar types of information would have been considered a state secret prior to the introduction of the Regulations on Open Government Information.

220e-service, Beijing government portal. <http://eservice.beijing.gov.cn/> (accessed 6 June 2014)

221E-service, Hunan government portal. <http://wsbs.hunan.gov.cn/virtualhall/index.jsp?areaCode=439900000000> (accessed 6 June 2014)

222Yunan government portal. <http://www.yn.gov.cn/InterAmblyopia/amblyopia.html> (accessed 6 June 2014)

223As I replaced Lollar's (2006) evaluation criteria of 'employment opportunities for civil service' and 'price index of major goods and services' with 'government budget' and 'government procurement,' my results on these two indices are not comparable with her findings.

224Hubei government portal. Zhaobiao Gonggao (Bidding Announcement). <http://xxgk.jiangxi.gov.cn/bmgkxx/sfzggw/> (accessed 6 June 2014).

The huge improvement in the quality of data available on provincial portals is probably due to the Open Government Information regulations introduced by China's central government in 2007, which makes clear that 'enhancing the transparency of the work of government' is one of the purposes of this initiative.²²⁵ Governments at each level were instructed to make all information of interest available to the public as long as it does not involve classified information. Disclosures of government budgets, procurement, and bidding for government projects are all listed in the regulations.²²⁶

According to a White Paper published by the State Council Information Office, governments at all levels are required to investigate and resolve in a timely manner all problems reported to the government by the public via the Internet, and to inform the public of the results.²²⁷ While the publishing of information relies on initiatives by each provincial government, my findings indicate that the public are increasingly involved in scrutinising the state by being offered channels to report government wrongdoing. In Lollar's previous study, only six provinces (accounting for 20% of the total) provided e-mail boxes for the public to file grievances. The number of portals that include grievance boxes spiked to 94% in my study. Portals containing 'accusation boxes' have also doubled in number from 44% to 96%. Lollar (2006: 36-37) defines 'accusation boxes' as a medium through which citizens can report corrupt public officials anonymously and 'grievance boxes' as a means for citizens to describe their personal experiences with officials who abused their power and the public trust.

Table 3. Transparency and Openness of Provincial Portals

Province	Bidding Information	Government Budget	Government Procurement	Grievance Box	Accusation Box
Beijing's	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Tianjin	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Hebei	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Shanxi	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES
Neimenggu	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES
Liaoning	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Jilin	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES
Heilongjiang	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Shanghai	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Jiangsu	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES
Zhejiang	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Anhui	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Fujian	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Jiangxi	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Shandong	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Henan	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

²²⁵The State Council. 2007. Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Open Government Information. Available at http://www.gov.cn/zwggk/2007-04/24/content_592937.htm (accessed 30 December 2014).

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷Information Office of the State Council. 2010. 'The Internet in China White Paper'. June 8. http://www.gov.cn/english/2010-06/08/content_1622956_5.htm (accessed 26 March 2015).

Hubei	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Hunan	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Guangdong	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Guangxi	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Hainan	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Chongqing	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Sichuan	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Guizhou	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Yunnan	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Xizang (Tibet)	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Shaanxi	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Gansu	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Qinghai	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Ningxia	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO
Xinjiang	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
Total (%)	81%	97%	94%	94%	94%
Lollar (2006)	41%	10%*	27%*	20%	44%

Table 3: Transparency and Openness of Provincial Portals

*Lollar (2006) included 'employment opportunities for civil service' and 'price index of major goods and services' in her evaluation criteria. I replaced these with 'government budget' and 'government procurement,' which are more relevant as measures that reflect transparency.

The distinction between 'accusation box' and 'grievance box' is blurred as many feedback mechanisms found on current government portals cover both issues. Take the Liaoning portal for example, where the 'Interactive' page offers users more than ten channels to get in touch with the provincial government. Netizens can write to the governor, the head of each department, and all mayors in the province. There are boxes for online petitions, collecting comments related to the Open Government Information initiative, feedback for government's responses, making suggestions, and complaints about party officials and organisations, provincial government officials and departments, government projects, as well as a Q&A section. The bottom of the page lists the hotline of 15 provincial departments dedicated to public complaint filing.²²⁸ Many of those functions may be seen as part of the government's efforts to reach out to the public, which were studied in the following section. Nevertheless, in order to compare portals' performance on openness and transparency, I retain Lollar (2006)'s method of evaluation via 'accusation box' and 'grievance box'.

6.1.4 Citizen Outreach and Responsiveness of e-governments

The fourth function of government portals is engagement and interaction with netizens, or citizen outreach and responsiveness. Table 4 examines the responsiveness of provincial portals to netizen concerns by looking at whether they provide channels for the public to communicate with officials, such as governor's

²²⁸Liaoning government portal. <http://www.ln.gov.cn/hdjl/index.html> (accessed 10 June 2014)

mail box, online forums, telephone hotline, and opinion surveys. While Table 1, 2 and 3 show huge improvements in the performance and influence of e-government on public-private relations in the last decade, my findings in Table 4 illustrate a mixed picture. In terms of netizen engagement, there were some improvements on most of the provincial portals, although not as dramatic as in the transparency and openness category. By giving access to top officials' e-mail boxes and by conducting online opinion polls, over 90% of portals achieved better service offerings in this area, compared with 74% and 45% respectively a decade ago.

The practice of providing telephone numbers for the public to make complaints or inquiries differs vastly between provinces. As we saw in the previous section, whilst the Liangning government lists 15 hotlines, 19% of portals do not display any contact information for similar purposes. There was modest progress in how many offer versions in other languages. Compared to 48% in 2006, 61% of the total number of state websites cater to speakers of languages other than Mandarin. As one can expect, Beijing and Shanghai, two of the most important cities in China, offer English versions of their websites. Chongqing and Zhejiang, both with significant numbers of expatriates, also offer French and Japanese versions. Clearly, these provinces hope to reach audiences other than the local Chinese citizens. Meanwhile, it is intriguing to find that the portal of the Xizang Tibetan Autonomous Region does not offer a version in the Tibetan language and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region portal does not have a Uyghur version. By comparison, the portal of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region offers a Mongolian edition.

In my study, 90% of portals invite netizens to express their thoughts on various topics via opinion polls, such as their satisfaction with police performance, their opinion regarding the official website, and public ideas on how to tackle the issue of street children. In Guangdong, the government also asks the public to submit their suggestions on proposed regulations regarding cosmetic products safety, rubbish collection, restrictions on massage salons, the protection of overseas Chinese, and fighting against counterfeit etc.²²⁹

Table 4. Measurement of Citizen Outreach and Responsiveness of Provincial Portals

Province	Governor's/ Mayor's Mail Box	Chatrooms/ Forums	Government Hotline	Online Survey	English/Other Language(s)
Beijing	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES
Tianjin	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Hebei	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES
Shanxi	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO
Inner Mongolia	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Liaoning	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO
Jilin	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES
Heilongjiang	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO
Shanghai	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES
Jiangsu	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES
Zhejiang	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

²²⁹Guangdong government portal. <http://www.gd.gov.cn/gzhd/hdmyzj/hdmyzjzx/> (accessed 20 June 2014)

Anhui	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Fujian	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO
Jiangxi	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES
Shandong	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO
Henan	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Hubei	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES
Hunan	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES
Guangdong	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Guangxi	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO
Hainan	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES
Chongqing	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES
Sichuan	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES
Guizhou	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO
Yunnan	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO
Xizang (Tibet)	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO
Shaanxi	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Gansu	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES
Qinghai	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES
Ningxia	YES	NO	NO	YES	NO
Xinjiang	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
Total	97%	19%	81%	90%	61%
Lollar (2006)	72%	27%	37%	45%	48%

Table 4: Measurement of Citizen Outreach and Responsiveness of Provincial Portals

While we saw a significant improvement in the quality of data on provincial portals, there was only one index among the criteria evaluated in my study that showed a poorer performance than at the time of Lollar's research: the percentage of portals including embedded chatroom and forum functionalities saw a decrease from 27% to 19%. Nonetheless, this is not equivalent to a lack of progress on state-society interactions, as the methods to engage netizens have evolved over the time. Firstly, many portals adopted other forms of public engagement, such as inviting netizens to attend online chat shows with officials. Secondly, as netizens in China switched to Weibo as the preferred platform for expressing opinion, nearly all provincial governments set up Weibo accounts to interact with the public. Many governments linked their Weibo accounts to their portals in order to direct the public to Weibo forums. Thirdly, over 80% of Chinese netizens access the Internet via smartphone. Accordingly, some portals offer a mobile phone version or apps. The Hainan portal offers a 3G edition for browsing on mobile phones, as well as support for both Android and iPhone OS systems.

4.7. Assessing the Central Government Portal

The portal of China's central government, gov.cn, serves as a window showcasing the work of the Chinese government, and is 'an important part of the construction of e-government' and 'a channel to interact with the public' that plays a significant role in promoting government openness and public accountability.²³⁰ It provides government information and services, and engages the public for a seamless cooperation between official sectors and civil society. Prior to the launch of gov.cn, there were over ten thousand government portals set up by different departments and offices from county to central level.²³¹ Due to the lack of a unified administration mechanism overseeing official websites, the existing government websites each operated according to individual standards. Not surprisingly, there was a fair amount of content overlap among them. One of the purposes of a central government website is therefore to integrate resources and improve information sharing.²³²

Under the administration of the State Council, the new portal acts as a platform for the central government, ministries and agencies of the State Council, and provinces, to provide online services and official information under the same umbrella. In February 2014, gov.cn had its first comprehensive upgrade since 2006, when the official edition was launched. Compared with the old version, the new version claims to place more emphasis on user friendliness, and on increased government transparency and responsiveness.²³³

In the previous section, I compared the e-government performance of provincial government portals with findings of Lollar (2006). My research conducted in 2014 found a significant improvement in terms of information availability, e-services, transparency, and netizen engagement. While Lollar (2006) only focuses on provincial portals, in this section I applied the same research methodology to assess the e-government performance of the Chinese edition of the central government portal (www.gov.cn) by comparing its content in 2005 and 2015. Having adopted Lollar's (2006) four criteria, I examined: a) the information available; b) e-services offered; c) its transparency and openness; and d) the quality of interactions facilitated with the public.

4.7.1. Findings of the Central Government Portal

My research suggests that developments in the status and offerings of the central government portal in the past decade are less dramatic than the changes observed at the provincial level. Of the four main categories examined on gov.cn, only one saw improvement in the last decade while the other two remain unchanged. 'Citizen Outreach and Responsiveness' increased from 40% to 60%. 'Transparency and

230About Us, Central Government portal. http://www.gov.cn/foot/2014-05/19/content_2681922.htm (accessed 28 March 2015).

231Xinhua News. 2006. 'Zhongguo zhengfuwang kaitong xiying shijie muguang (The launching of Government website attracts attention from the world). 6 January. http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2006-01/04/content_4005174.htm (accessed 19 March 2015).

232Xinhua News. 2006. 'Zhuanjia ping zhongguo zhengfuwang kaitong (Pundits comment on the launching of the government website). 1 January. http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2006-01/01/content_144563.htm (accessed 19 March 2015).

233□ People's Daily Online. 2014. 'Xinban zhongguo zhengfu wang shangxian, jiakuai tuijin fuwuxing zhengfu jianshe (The launching of new government portal: speeding up the construction of service oriented government)'. 5 March. <http://it.people.com.cn/n/2014/0305/c1009-24536936.html> (accessed 19 March 2015).

Openness' was at 60% in 2005 and 2015; e-services offered remain at 50%; in terms of quality and volume of information provided, gov.cn scored 100% in both 2005 and 2015. One of the reasons for the less significant progress than that seen in provincial websites is that at its launch, the central government portal could boast standards that were already very high. Thus, its performance was satisfactory from the beginning and there was a small margin for further improvement.

In fact, provincial portals display a wide variety of service and usability standards that usually reflect the level of development of the individual provinces they represent. Beijing and Shanghai's websites, for example, were richer in features and easier to navigate, while Ningxia and Hainan, two of the remotest provinces, had less developed official pages. The poorly performing provincial portals at the bottom of the rankings drag down the overall average performance, as seen in Lollar's (2006) study. A poor start allows great potential for improvement, as my study of the portals in 2014 suggests. Comparing the developments in e-government between provincial and central governments, the former saw more progress in the space of a decade. The following section provides a detailed examination of the central government portal's performance in 2005 and 2015 in four tables.

4.7.2. Information Provided by the Central Government Portal

Similarly to provincial portals, the first function of the central government website is to provide official information. Table 5 examines the information available on gov.cn, such as government documents, laws and regulations; news and links to other departments and agencies; links to other news websites; and search functions within the website. gov.cn fulfilled all requirements and scored 100% in both 2005 and 2015, which suggests that it met expectations in the provision of information.

While provincial portals upload government documents, laws and regulations of a provincial nature, or related to the province concerned, the central government portal contains documents, laws and regulations originated by central level state bodies, mainly the State Council and other ministries. The state media, Xinhua News, describes gov.cn as the 'unprecedented authoritative government data base' that contains seven types of State Council files such as decrees, directives, and documents, as well as the State Council Gazette published since 2000.²³⁴

Year	Gov't Documents	News	Search within the Portal	Gov't Laws/ Regulations	Links to Other Agencies	Links to News Media	Audio/ Video Clips	Total (%)
2005	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	100%
2015	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	100%

Table 5: Information Provided by the Central Government Portal

234 □ Xinhua News. 2006. 'Zhongguo zhengfuwang kaitong xiyin shijie muguang (The launching of Government website attracts attention from the world). 6 January. http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2006-01/04/content_4005174.htm (accessed 19 March 2015)

In terms of acting as a source portal with links to the 31 provinces,²³⁵ the performance of gov.cn in the past decade provides a mixed picture. The 2005 version had dedicated sections for local governments, such as 'Local Regulations,' 'Local Government Directive,' and 'Appointments of Officials (Local).' The first two sections no longer exist in the most recent version of the website, which was trimmed to show only documents and regulations issued by the State Council. News stories published on provincial portals mostly relate to the province concerned, while news on gov.cn cover both central and local governments. News articles on the 2005 gov.cn site were un-categorised, but on the 2015 gov.cn site they are conveniently organised into four sub-indexes: the Premier, the State Council, Ministries, and Locals. Like its original version, gov.cn in 2015 provides comprehensive links to other state departments, agencies, provincial portals and news websites of the central state media (such the *People's Daily*, CCTV and Xinhua News Agency).

4.7.3. e-services Offered by the Central Government Portal

The second function of the central government portal is to provide e-services. Table 6 illustrates whether gov.cn provides a) executable e-services, such as paying taxes, replacing driving licenses; and b) guidance e-services, such as instructions on getting ID cards, marriage certificates, passports, and downloadable forms. The central government portal in both 2005 and 2015 provided guiding e-services but failed to offer executable e-services. Regardless of the efforts made by the party-state in the promotion of e-government, there has been no improvement in the central government's e-service offering. This hugely contradicts the extent of change in the performance of provincial portals, where executable e-services increased from an average of 17% in Lollar's (2006) study to 96% in my study in 2014. Guiding e-services rose from 83% in Lollar's (2006) study to 100% in 2014.

In 2005, when gov.cn was still in beta version, it provided online information for individuals, businesses and foreigners, on topics ranging from household registrations, passport applications, business licenses, work permits, paying tax etc. It also had a section for the public to download application forms, such as social insurance, and marriage or divorce certificates. Although there was a section called 'online service' under the Business subheading, it merely provided links to other government departments instead of an e-service that is fully accessible online. One of the links listed in the 'online service' section, 'application for advertisement permit of health-care and food products,' leads to the State Food and Drug Administration website that offers a downloadable version of the application.

Year	Executable e-services	Guidance e-services	Total (%)
2005	NO	YES	50%
2015	NO	YES	50%

Table 6: e-services Offered by the Central Government Portal

²³⁵About Us, Central Government portal. http://www.gov.cn/foot/2014-05/19/content_2681922.htm (accessed 28 March 2015).

The e-services available on gov.cn in 2015 were more comprehensive and better organised than their 2005 original. In addition to providing online information for individuals, businesses and foreigners, a separate index was created for 'social organisations (including NGOs),' which, among other features, guides users on how to register an NGO and offers application forms for download. While 96% of provincial portals in 2014 allowed netizens to complete e-service requests online, the central government portal did not provide executable e-services in 2015, but redirected users to the relevant departments of local governments. For example, applying for Chinese citizenship requires users to access a link to the website of the Ministry of Public Security that contains further information regarding the standard procedure, but no application form is available for download on that page.

On the surface, it appears that gov.cn failed to provide executable e-services compared with what provincial portals have achieved. However, the lack of development in this area is justifiable through the following reasons. Firstly, gov.cn represents the central government, the State Council, which does not handle many of the e-services offered on provincial portals such as household registrations, issuing business licenses, and marriage certificates. Secondly, gov.cn acts as a directory pointing users to the webpages of different departments and portals of provinces that provide the actual e-services. For example, if an Internet user in Beijing wants to apply for a passport, he or she may click 'Beijing' on the central government portal which will then lead to the e-service page of the Beijing government portal, allowing the user to make an appointment online.

4.7.4. Transparency and Openness of the Central Government Portal

The third function of the central government portal is to engage and interact with netizens. Table 7 shows the portal's role in helping the party-state to be more transparent by publishing data related to government project bidding, budget and procurement, as well as in fostering an open environment by providing channels for netizens to scrutinise the state. Gov.cn scored 60% in this area in 2005 but dropped to 0% in 2015. Information regarding 'Bidding Information,' 'Government Procurement,' and the 'Grievance Box' that were available in 2005 disappeared in 2015. Neither in 2005 nor in 2015 did the central government provide an 'Accusation Box,' or information on the government budget. As the provincial portals in this study make 'Bidding Information,' 'Government Procurement' and 'Government Budget' available, my findings show that the portals of provincial governments today provide greater transparency and openness compared with a decade ago, while the reverse is true of the central government portal, which is less transparent than it used to be. Although the new version of gov.cn launched in 2014 claimed to increase government transparency,²³⁶ and Premier Li Keqiang openly advocated the initiative of Open Government Information,²³⁷ this study reaches a different conclusion and suggests that the policy implemented in practice negates the aspirations to openness and transparency.

²³⁶*People's Daily Online*. 2014. 'Xinban zhongguo zhengfu wang shangxian, jiaukai tuijin fuwuxing zhengfu jianshe (The launching of new government portal: speeding up the construction of service oriented government)'. 5 March. <http://it.people.com.cn/n/2014/0305/c1009-24536936.html> (accessed 19 March 2015).

²³⁷Central Government portal. 2014. 'Li Keqiang: yi zhengwu xinxi gongkai cujin zhengwu chengxin jianshe (Li Keqiang: open government information to promote government accountability)'. 16 January. http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2014-01/16/content_2568381.htm (accessed 14 March 2015).

Year	Bidding Information	Government Budget	Government Procurement	Grievance Box	Accusation Box	Total (%)
2005	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	60%
2015	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	0%

Table 7: Transparency and Openness of the Chinese Central Government Portal

A closer look at the front page of gov.cn in 2005 confirms that there was a section called 'Government Procurement,' which linked to a special page dedicated to state bidding and procurement information. That page was further divided into five subheadings: Central Government Procurement, Law and Regulations, Procurement Information, Central Government Projects for Bidding, and Local Government Projects for Bidding. Each subheading linked to a new webpage containing dozens of bidding and procurement announcements.²³⁸ Information available on these pages included news that Baosteel Group was looking to build the new headquarters of the China Central Television,²³⁹ or that the Qinghai provincial government called for the building of an office automation system.²⁴⁰

In the 2015 version of gov.cn, this special page, along with its subheadings, no longer exists on the front page of the website or its individual sections. Searching for the keyword 'procurement' (*caigou*) on the portal found news stories that contain this keyword but nothing about official announcements of government procurement projects. A search of the keyword 'bidding' (*zhaobiao*) led to similar results. Only when trying to combine the terms in a search for 'procurement and bidding (*caigou zhaobiao*)' did the results show a few official calls for bidding. Only one such item was published in 2015, made by the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council.²⁴¹ One bidding announcement was published in 2014, two in 2013, three in 2012 and one in 2005.²⁴² Compared with gov.cn in 2005 when similar information was widely available with special pages dedicated to it, the new version of the portal provides far less information on procurement and bidding than a decade ago.

While most of the provincial portals have a dedicated page called 'Open Information' (*xinxi gongkai*), which publishes provincial government budget and public spending data, no such page was found on the central government portal in both 2005 and 2015. A search on gov.cn of the keyword 'central government budget' found no results although the 2014 Government Budget can be found on the website of the Ministry of Finance as well as on Xinhua News, which suggests that it is not a state secret. This comes in stark contrast to the State Council's notice in April 2014, issued via gov.cn, urging government agencies

238 □ Central Government Portal. Government Procurement. 2005. Available via WayBack Machine.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20051106084636/http://www.gov.cn/zwgk/zfcg.htm> (accessed 14 March 2015).

239 State Council. 'Baogang zhongbiao yangshi xin taizhi A biaoduan gongcheng (Baosteel tenders for building new headquarters of the China Central Television A wing)'. Available via WayBack Machine.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20051125153849/http://www.sasac.gov.cn/zyqy/gcjz/200510250049.htm> (accessed 15 March 2015).

240 Central Government portal. 2005. 'Qinghaisheng zhengfu bangongting bantong zidonghua xitong jianshe zhaobiao gonggao (Call for tender for building office automation system for Qinghai Provincial Government)'. http://www.gov.cn/zwgk/2005-10/20/content_80244.htm (accessed 15 March 2015).

241 Central Government portal. 2015. 'Guoyou zongdian daxig qiye wufu caigou (Key state own enterprise service procurement). 17 March. http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-03/17/content_2835222.htm (accessed 20 March 2015).

242 Central Government portal. Search results of keyword, 'caigou zhaobiao'. <http://new.sousuo.gov.cn/s.htm?q=采购招&t=gov&timetype=&mintime=&maxtime=> (accessed 20 March 2015).

to release information of public concern or covering public rights.²⁴³ It is not openly known why the latest version of the central government portal fails to provide this information.

7.1.4 Citizen Outreach and Responsiveness of the Central Government Portal

The fourth function of the government portal is engaging and interacting with netizens, or citizen outreach and responsiveness. Table 8 illustrates if the central portal provides different channels, for example mail boxes of top leaders, online forums, telephone hotlines, and opinion surveys, for the public to communicate with officials. We saw progress in the overall responsiveness offering, from 40% in 2005 to 80% in 2015. Neither in 2005 nor in 2015 did gov.cn offer chat room/ forum functionalities or details of a telephone hotline. By comparison, the performance of provincial portals increased from 46% in Lollar (2006)'s study to 70% in 2014. Similarly to conclusions reached on the basis of data in table 3 in relation to openness and transparency, portals of provincial governments outperformed the central government in outreach and responsiveness.

In both 2005 and 2015, gov.cn offered online surveys and an English language version. On the day of the gov.cn beta version launch on 1 October 2005, over ten thousand netizens took part in the first government-led survey. 40% of respondents stated that their main interest was the online interaction between the government and netizens.²⁴⁴ One of the netizens expressed the hope that gov.cn would not only act as the window for the dissemination of government messages to the people, but also as a channel for the people's voice to be heard by the state.²⁴⁵ The head of gov.cn acknowledged that better interaction is an important way to improve communication between the state and netizens.²⁴⁶ Clearly, there is a demand to engage and interact with the state via the central government portal, a fact whose significance is openly recognised by the state.

Year	Central Leaders' Mail Box	Chatroom/ Forum	Government Hotline	Online Survey	English/Other Language(s)	Total (%)
2005	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	40%
2015	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	80%

Table 8: Citizen Outreach and Responsiveness of the Central Government Portal

Although chat rooms and forums are not available on gov.cn, it offers other multi-media platforms. The HIV/ AIDS prevention teleconference held by the State Council in Zhongnanhai on 28 November 2005

243State Council. 2014. 'Guowuyuan guanyu bangongting guanyu yinfa 2014 nian zhengfu xinxi gongkai gongzuo yaodian de tongzhi (State Council's notice on 2014 open government information)'. 1 April. http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2014-04/01/content_8728.htm (accessed 20 March 2015).

244Xinhua News. 2005. 'Zhongguo zhengfu wang kaitong shi zhengzhi wenming zai wangluo shidai de biran xuanze (The launching of the government website was the necessarily choice in the Internet age)'. 1 October. http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2005-10/01/content_74100.htm (accessed 19 March 2015).

245Ibid.

246Xinhua News. 2006. 'Zhongguo zhengfu wang fuzeren: laolao shuli fuwu gongzhong yishi (The head of gov.cn: firmly uphold the idea of serving the public)'. 10 October. http://news.xinhuanet.com/misc/2006-10/10/content_5186789.htm (accessed 16 August 2015)

was broadcasted live on gov.cn. That was the very first time that ordinary netizens witnessed the proceedings of a State Council meeting involving top officials. During the three months trial period of gov.cn between October and December 2005, three State Council meetings were broadcasted live on the website.²⁴⁷ On the 2015 gov.cn version there is a special column called 'Live Chat' (*zaixian fangtan*), where at least one topic of public interest will be discussed each week. Past topics covered a wide range of issues, from the latest government regulations, to environmental issues, to postal delivery services, and foreign policy. During the live discussion, government officials chat with the host and answer netizens' questions posted online. In March 2015, after the release of the 2015 Government Work Report, three officials from different departments were invited to host the Live Chat and explain the implications of the devolution of power mentioned in the Work Report.²⁴⁸ During this live chat program, 18 enquiries and comments made by netizens were answered.²⁴⁹

Another new feature previously not available is the Message Board for the Premier, which I classified as 'Central Leaders' Mail Box' in Table 8. Many of the provincial portals provide the governor's e-mail box for the public to contact their provincial leader. The new version of gov.cn does not provide an e-mail box but instead introduces a more interactive channel—the message board.²⁵⁰ Messages left by netizens are not only addressed to the Premier, but also to other ministers and government agencies. This message board receives an average of 10,000 posts each month.²⁵¹ According to state media, providing feedback via this channel will be a permanent mechanism in the State Council.²⁵²

4.8. Limitations of Government Portals

Although we saw notable progress in the quality and service offering of government portals in the past few years, and of provincial ones in particular, e-government development in China is not without issues. The following section looks into some of these problems, such as the poor performance in the ranking of Chinese e-government compared to similar state enterprises in other countries, the lack of information updates on the websites, and the lack of interaction with netizens, partly owing to the shortage in the number of professional staff responsible for the maintenance of the websites.

In the United Nations E-Government Survey 2014, China ranked 70 among all 193 UN member states. The UN survey examined member states' national websites and evaluated how e-government policies and strategies were implemented. The income level of a country is considered a general indicator of economic capacity and progress that in turn imposes a strong influence on the e-government development of the country. However, since the UN published the E-Government Development Index for

247 Xinhua News. 2006. 'Zhongguo zhengfuwang kaitong xiyin shijie muguang (The launching of Government website attracts attention from the world)'. 6 January. http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2006-01/04/content_4005174.htm (accessed 19 March 2015).

248 Central Government portal. 2015. 'San bumen jiehe zhengfu gongzuo baogao tan jianzheng fangquan (Three departments explain devolution of power and the Government Work Report)'. 10 March. <http://www.gov.cn/wenzheng/talking08/20150310ft91/> (accessed 19 March 2015).

249 Ibid.

250 A more detailed account of this message board will be discussed in the next chapter of this thesis.

251 Chinese government portal. 2014. 'Jiemi wangyou jianyang ruhe zhida Li Keqiang antou (How does netizens' message reach Li Keqiang's desk revealed)'. December 25. http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2014-12/25/content_2796167.htm (accessed 3 January 2015).

252 CCP News. 2014. 'Zongli liuyanban yinling wangluo wenzheng xin changtai (Premier message board lead the way for online accountability)'. September 2. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/pinglun/n/2014/0902/c241220-25589671.html> (accessed 7 May 2014).

the first time in 2003, China's ranking in the world has slipped slightly,²⁵³ despite the country's economic growth and the party-state's effort in promoting e-government. In the 2014 survey, China lags behind Azerbaijan, another upper middle level income country that ranked 68 in the world.²⁵⁴ Even Mongolia, a lower middle-income country ranked 65, five places higher than China.²⁵⁵ Nonetheless, China's state media focuses on the fact that its ranking climbed up 8 places compared to the previous survey and emphasises that China ranked top 20 in Asia (but did not point out that it was third from the bottom).²⁵⁶

Year of the UN E-government Survey	China's Ranking in the World
2014	70
2012	78
2010	72
2008	65
2005	57
2004	67
2003	74

Table 9: China's Ranking in the United Nation E-Government Development Index

Source: UN E-Government Survey 2003, 2004, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2014.

There are three components of the E-Government Development Index: 1) Telecommunication Infrastructure Index (TII) that measures the penetration of mobile phones, fixed-telephones, and broadband; 2) Human Capital Index (HCI), which includes adult literacy, gross enrolment ratio, expected years of schooling, and average years of schooling; 3) Online Service Index (OSI), which measures the availability of multichannel delivery services, open government, e-participation etc.²⁵⁷ Although the UN report did not explain the reasons behind each individual state's ranking, there are several reasons that may contribute to China's e-government performance. Firstly, although China has the largest Internet population, its penetration rate was only 48% at the end of 2014,²⁵⁸ which means that more than half of its citizens did not have access to the Internet, and could therefore not benefit from the provision of e-government services. This could be one of the factors influencing the TII score. Secondly, in terms of e-participation and open government, the Chinese government is yet to fully embrace it, as we have seen in the previous section regarding provincial and central government portals in particular. This might affect the OSI score when calculating E-Government Development Index.

In fact, the performance of government websites was considered unsatisfactory by the party-state itself. The State Council's State Information Centre conducted an assessment in 2013 of 556 Chinese

253A full list of the survey published by the UN is available on the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs website. <http://unpan3.un.org/egovkb/Data-Center> (accessed 23 March 2015).
 254United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 2014. 'United Nations E-Government Survey 2014'. 17 July. http://unpan3.un.org/egovkb/Portals/egovkb/Documents/un/2014-Survey/E-Gov_Complete_Survey-2014.pdf (accessed 23 March 2015).
 255Ibid.
 256Eugene Clark. 2014. 'China making steady progress on e-government rankings' 20 July. China.org. http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2014-07/20/content_32995020.htm (accessed 24 March 2015).
 257For more detail, see Survey methodology, 'United Nations E-Government Survey 2014', pp.185-191. http://unpan3.un.org/egovkb/Portals/egovkb/Documents/un/2014-Survey/E-Gov_Complete_Survey-2014.pdf (accessed 23 March 2015).
 258Reuters. 2015. 'China's internet population hits 649 million, 86 percent on phones'. 3 February. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/03/us-china-internet-idUSKBN0L713L20150203> (accessed 24 March 2015).

government websites by looking at their influence on the Internet. The websites examined ranged from central departments of the State Council such as the Foreign Ministry to municipal government portals. On average, government websites scored 50.90 out of 100 points, provincial government portals scored 53.64, and central departments scored 48.25.²⁵⁹ The report also shows that government websites were particularly poor in making good use of social media, providing mobile phone capabilities and versions in other languages. The findings in the report are in line with my study, in which I found that provincial portals outperformed the central government's website, and not many portals make use of social media and provide versions designed for mobile access.

The poor maintenance of content is an additional issue that government websites face. While government offices at different levels are required to set up a website, the quality of the websites varies. Of 600 official websites at the county level, 87% contain at least three items that have not been updated, and 80% contain broken links.²⁶⁰ On the front page of the State Administration of Taxation in Changchun, Jilin province, the tab 'Director's Mail Box' links back to the same page instead of a separate page or an e-mail box where users can leave messages to the director.²⁶¹ As of January 2015, there were only three emails from the public displayed in the Mayor's Mail Box of Haikou city, Hainan province, with the last email received in April 2010.²⁶² The e-mail box had not been updated for nearly five years.

Shortage of staff can be one of the reasons for the slow update of web content. The central government portal belongs to the State Council and is operated by the central state media Xinhua News Agency's online team who provide the staff and news content.²⁶³ This model is copied by most of the provincial portals who ask their provincial state media to handle the daily operation of the website.²⁶⁴ Despite being managed by state media, some of the government websites do not have enough staff to update the content. Instead, a web manager is normally asked to include this in their prerogatives.²⁶⁵ It was not clear who was responsible for the portals at each level of government until the State Council issued a guideline in December 2014 specifying that the general office of the provincial and municipal governments are in charge of the maintenance of portals.²⁶⁶ Despite this, from an official perspective, the extent to which running a portal can benefit the government remains unclear as gross domestic product (GDP) is still a key factor when evaluating the government's performance, and is a metric not influenced by portals.

Although the majority of provincial portals in my study provide channels to engage the netizens, the apparent willingness of the officialdom to reach out to the public can be merely a gesture. One of the major complaints made by the public about government practices in recent years is the limited amount of

259State Information Centre. 2013. 'Zhongguo zhengfu wangzhan hulianwang yingxiangli pinggu baogao 2013 (Assessment report on the influence of Chinese government websites 2013)'. available at

<http://www.sic.gov.cn/archiver/SIC/UpFile/Files/Default/20140516105650290820.pdf> (accessed 14 March 2015).

260Nanfang Zhoumo. 2015. 'Zhengfu wangzhan dakao (Big examination for government websites)'. 9 April.

<http://www.infzm.com/content/108798> (accessed 9 April 2015).

261State Administration of Taxation in Changchun, Jilin province. <http://jl-n-tax.gov.cn/cc/> (accessed 15 November 2014).

262Haikou Government. Mail Box. <http://www.haikou.gov.cn/hdjl/scxx/nqiqiang/> (accessed 11 January 2015).

263Southern Weekly. 2015. 'Zhengfu wangzhan dakao (Big examination for government websites)'. 9 April.

<http://www.infzm.com/content/108798> (accessed 9 April 2015).

264Some of the government websites at the lower level are also used in this model. My field trip to Nanhai district, Foshan, Guangdong province in July 2014 found that nanhai.gov.cn is operated by staff from the Foshan Daily.

265Southern Weekly. 2015. 'Zhengfu wangzhan dakao (Big examination for government websites)'. 9 April.

266Central government portal. 2014. 'Guowuyuan bangongting guanyu jiaqiang zhengfu wangzhan xinxi neirong jianshe de yijian (State Council's comment on strengthening government website information)'. 1 December.

http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2014-12/01/content_9283.htm (accessed 10 December 2014).

and at times lack of interaction with netizens, even when they have specific queries.²⁶⁷ A report compiled by the National Informatisation Steering Group that was published jointly by the CCP Central Committee and the State Council, points out that the problem with Chinese government websites is that they were excellent in providing documents related to regulations and laws, but almost universally lacked any functional ability for netizens to interact with the government, or any means of public consultation.²⁶⁸

Realising the significance of the damage caused by the poorly maintained government websites to the overall image of the state, the State Council launched the first nation-wide survey in March 2015, which is expected to involve over 100 thousand websites at all levels of government, ministries, subordinate departments, and institutions. The aim of the campaign is to 'effectively solve' the issues most commonly reported by the public, namely, 'out-of-date, inaccurate, non-responsive and out-of-touch,' and to enhance the influence and accountability of the government.²⁶⁹ The campaign, which lasted until December 2015, investigate if the websites are useful, regularly updated, and whether questions raised by the netizens via the websites have been dealt with. According to the evaluation form, a website will be closed if it fails to update the front page for more than two weeks, or if it fails to respond to netizen enquiries in less than three months. As for e-services, a website loses marks if it fails to offer key information (such as office hours, a telephone number, and office address), or do not provide downloadable application forms. It remains to be seen the extent to which this campaign can achieve the goals set by the State Council.

4.9. Conclusion

I argue that through 'authoritarian resilience 2.0', China's political system is capable of enhancing the state's capacity via institutional adaptations and policy adjustments in accordance with the ICT development in order to stay in power. The Chinese government has been advocating the use of information technologies in both government and governance. The development of e-government in China began in the 1970s and can be categorised in four stages: 1) introducing computers to the government sector; 2) government informatisation; 3) e-government and; 4) transition to e-governance. These stages evolved along with the development of Internet technologies.

By adapting Lollar's (2006) analytical framework, I assessed the e-government performance of all 31 provincial government portals and the central government portal. Comparing my study with Lollar's (2006) research, the most significant finding is that the functions and e-services provided by provincial government portals in 2014 were much more comprehensive and sophisticated than in 2006. At the same time, e-government developments of the central government portal (gov.cn) in the past decade are far less dramatic than provincial ones. Gov.cn in 2015 scored 0% in terms of transparency and openness. Information regarding 'Bidding Information,' 'Government Procurement,' and the 'Grievance Box' that were

²⁶⁷ *Southern Weekly*. 2015. 'Zhengfu wangzhan dakao (Big examination for government websites)'. 9 April.

<http://www.infzm.com/content/108798> (accessed 9 April 2015).

²⁶⁸ Liaoning Government. 2004. 'Liaoningsheng xinxihua lingdao xiaozu guanyu jiaqiang quansheng dianzi zhengwu jianshe de yijian (Liaoning Provincial Informatisation Steering Group on enhancing e-government construction)' 18 February.

<http://www.snsedu.gov.cn/flfg/ln.htm> (accessed 13 January 2015).

²⁶⁹ Central government portal. 2015. 'Guowoyuan bangongting guanyu kaizhan diyici quanguo zhengfu wangzhan pucha de tongzhi (State Council's announcement of the first nation-wide government website survey)'. 24 March.

http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2015-03/24/content_9552.htm (25 March 2015).

available in 2005 on the central government portal disappeared in 2015. These backward developments suggests that on the one hand, the party-state wants to promote e-government through portals, on the other hand, it is uneasy for releasing too much 'secrets' online. Bidding and government procurements are some of the hotbeds of bribery and corruption. As regards removing 'Grievance Box' from portal, one of the explanations is that there have been many other platforms for the interactions between the state and the public. When Weibo and WeChat became the most popular social media platforms among Chinese netizens, there's little incentive to file a complaint via government portal.

My study suggests that there has been significant progress in the development of e-government resources on provincial portals in the past decade, but progress made by the central government portal is less obvious. Although the majority of provincial portals in my study provide channels to engage the netizens, the apparent willingness of the officialdom to reach out to the public can be merely a gesture. As the United Nations points out, that e-participation highly depends on strong political commitment, collaborative leadership, vision and appropriate institutional frameworks that ensure structured ways of engaging people, and guarantee that inputs provided become a meaningful part of the policy-making process.²⁷⁰ Meanwhile, the areas in which provincial portals did well include the dissemination of official information, the quality and volume of e-service offerings, enhanced transparency, and public engagement. These were achieved by a number of regulations and policies advocated by the Chinese central government.

Despite China's economic growth and its effort in promoting e-government, China's ranking in the United Nations E-Government Development Index slipped slightly since 2003, and it currently ranks 70th among 193 UN member states. In spite of the improvements registered in the data published by government portals, particularly provincial ones, e-government development in China is not without issues. The main complaints by netizens relate to the slow rate of information updates on the websites, and the lack of interaction with the public. In fact, the performance of government websites was considered unsatisfactory even by the party-state itself. The State Council launched the first nation-wide campaign in March 2015 requesting government websites at all levels to improve their services.

Regardless of the shortcomings mentioned above, government portals are an important element of e-government that may enhance the accountability of the state by providing useful information, offering better e-services, increasing transparency and openness (e-scrutiny), and by engaging and interacting more with the public (e-consultation and e-participation). These functions are indeed the same as those comprising e-governance (*wangluo wenzheng*), that the CCP has been promoting. The government portals studied in this chapter demonstrate the authorities' willingness to make good use of ICT to advance its agenda. In the next two chapters, I will examine other two adaptive Internet strategies—government Weibo and online message boards—to illustrate the party-state's capability to adapt and change in accordance with the ICT development.

²⁷⁰United Nations E-Government Survey 2016. <http://workspace.unpan.org/> (accessed 23 January 2017)

5. Chapter Five: Government Weibo

5.1. Introduction

On Christmas Day 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping posted his very first Weibo (Chinese equivalent of Twitter) post during a visit to the *People's Liberation Army Daily*. It was believed to be the first Weibo message posted by any of China's top officials,²⁷¹ which, not surprisingly, went viral on the Internet. It was reposted more than 300,000 times and attracted over 35,000 comments in less than 30 hours.²⁷² Although Chinese officials and government offices have been setting up Weibo accounts for many years, Xi's gesture is an acknowledgement by the most senior Chinese leader of social media as an important platform to interact with netizens. In January 2016, officials from the Cyberspace Administration of China, the *People's Daily*, and Sina Weibo attended the 2016 Government Weibo Influence Summit in Guangzhou to discuss the role of government Weibo in the promotion of governance.²⁷³ The attendants pointed out that the government can listen to the public's needs, communicate with the public, provide services, and help solve their problems via Weibo, thus enabling a new strand of governance through the Internet.²⁷⁴

Surely, using social media to interact with the public is not unique to Chinese authorities. Many world leaders as well as government offices have been communicating with Internet users on social media platforms. French President Macron's Instagram is full of pictures showing him performing official duties and occasionally, his personal life. Former US President Obama's Twitter account has 95 million followers, while Trump is famous for announcing important policies by tweeting. Even non-elected Russian regional governors also use Twitter (Renz and Sullivan 2013). While Twitter is banned in China, many foreign leaders and institutions have set up Weibo accounts, including the Indian Prime Minister Modi, the UK Prime Minister, and the United Nations.

Showing adaptiveness to the new media environment, the CCP has been keen to embrace ICT to serve its needs. One of the fastest growing social media services is microblogging (also known as Weibo). As I pointed out in the chapter on Internet commentators, the party-state shifts its attention along with the development of new online platforms. Given the huge potential of Weibo, the Chinese authorities moved in by means of controlling it, as well as by making use of it. The nationwide crackdown on Weibo celebrities in the summer of 2013 was concomitant with the promotion of government Weibo, serving as a classic example of 'carrot and stick' approach.

271Zheping Huang, 2015. 'Chinese president Xi Jinping blogged for the first time—and 48,000 people commented,' 28 December. <http://qz.com/582179/chinese-president-xi-jinping-blogged-for-the-first-time-and-48000-people-commented/> (accessed 6 January 2016)

272CCTV. 2015. 'President Xi's first Weibo goes viral,' 28 December. <http://english.cntv.cn/2015/12/28/VIDE1451257567404498.shtml> (accessed 5 January 2016)

273Sina News. 2016. '2016 zhengwu v yingxiangli fenghui zai hui juxing (2016 government weibo summit held in guangzhou),' 19 January.

<http://gd.sina.com.cn/city/csgz/2016-01-19/city-ifxnqrkc6658517.shtml> (accessed 22 February 2016)

274Xinhua News. 2016. 'Zhengwu zhishu weibo yingxiangli baogao fabu (Government weibo influential index released),' 21 January.

http://news.xinhuanet.com/zgjx/2016-01/21/c_135030533.htm (accessed 22 February 2016)

As of March 2017, Sina Weibo's active monthly users number reached 340 million, overtaking US-based Twitter.²⁷⁵ Weibo has increasingly become an important source of news covering social discontent. It surpassed online forums to become the second most important platform for the publication of public incidents after traditional news media (Dou and Li eds. 2011: 3). Some of the scandals exposed by Weibo users resulted in the dismissal of government officials, such as the downfall of the deputy head of China's central National Development and Reform Commission, whose wrongdoing was reported by a journalist on Weibo.²⁷⁶

Chinese leaders eventually recognised the importance of Weibo in the CCP's propaganda strategy, especially after Xi Jinping became the party leader in 2012. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, if Internet commentators could leave pro-government comments on online forums or on the Bulletin Board System (BBS) by using false identities, it is difficult for them to operate on Weibo, as registering a Weibo account requires a real ID. Nonetheless, the party-state came up with another innovative strategy to meet their Internet technology development targets—encouraging government offices and party organs to open Weibo accounts and to engage with netizens directly. More than 170,000 government departments and individual officials, from ministerial and provincial to county level, have set up Weibo accounts on the four major domestic Weibo service providers in China.²⁷⁷

A professor from Tsinghua University divides the evolution of government Weibo into three stages: 'government Weibo 1.0' focused on disseminating information, 2.0 emphasised interaction with netizens, while 3.0 further extends its function to provide e-services.²⁷⁸ The promotion of government Weibo, along with e-government and government online message boards can be considered as part of the CCP's efforts to encourage *wangluo wenzheng*, which includes the idea of e-consultation, e-participation, and e-governance.²⁷⁹ Why does the Chinese party-state embrace Weibo? How did it evolve from 1.0 to 3.0? Has the government successfully engaged netizens, mobilised public support, improved the state's image, and enhanced accountability via Weibo? I argue that although the Chinese government heavily censor the information available on Weibo, the state also actively embraces this social media to promote better governance. In other words, the CCP's approach to Weibo has gone beyond censorship and has adopted innovative and forward thinking strategies to shape policy discourse and practical interactions with grassroots society via the Internet.

This chapter proceeds as follows: it begins with a brief account of the development of Weibo in China, before moving on to a literature review which shows that scholars in the field focus on Weibo censorship or adopt approaches that are distinct from mine. I then explain the impact of online public opinion on the state, and examine the structure and work flow of government Weibo accounts with the help of cases drawn from government microblogs by assessing their characteristics in four areas: 1) serving the public

²⁷⁵BBC. 2017. 'Twitter user numbers overtaken by China's Sina Weibo', 17 May. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-39947442> (accessed 22 May 2017)

²⁷⁶Luo Changping, the investigative journalist from the business magazine *Caijing* was forced to leave this position. He has declined an interview request by me during my fieldwork trip in Beijing due to pressure from the government. For more details of his case, see Celia Hatton. 'How a Chinese journalist took on a top official,' *BBC News*, 14 May 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-22523903> (accessed 18 February 2016)

²⁷⁷Li, Yongchun. 2013. 'Number of Gov't Weibo Accounts Soars,' *Caixin Online*. 28 March. <http://english.caixin.com/2013-03-28/100507640.html> (accessed 19 May 2015)

²⁷⁸□ *People's Daily Online*. 2016. 'Zhengwu weibo zhuanxing (The transformation of government weibo),' 3 February. <http://media.people.com.cn/n/2015/0203/c40606-26496208.html> (accessed 25 February 2016)

²⁷⁹A further discussion of *wangluo wenzheng* can be found in chapter one of this thesis.

interest; 2) interacting with the public; 3) managing crisis and refuting rumour; and 4) improving the image of the state. Overall, this chapter illustrates how the party-state works to achieve these objectives. Before drawing a conclusion, I will include an assessment of the limitations of the government's Weibo strategy.

5.2. Methodology

There are multiple Weibo service providers in China, including those operated by commercial companies such as NetEase Weibo, Sina Weibo, Souhu Weibo, Tianya Weibo, and Tencent Weibo. Chinese state media, the *People's Daily*, and Xinhua News Agency, have also joined the market by launching People's Weibo and Xinhua Weibo respectively. Among these Weibo service providers, Sina Weibo is the very first Weibo service launched in China, and thus the most popular choice by government offices, CCP departments, and individual officials. It hosts over 130,000 government Weibo accounts, with propaganda departments, police, and judiciary leading the way in the number of accounts set up.²⁸⁰ Due to their prevalence and popularity, government accounts set up on Sina Weibo were chosen for this study.

Qualitative methods of data collection, such as document analysis, interviews, participant observation, and web content analysis were used to examine government Weibo in this chapter. Non-participatory observation was also a tool in the collection of data on netizens' interactions with government officials on Sina Weibo. I logged on to Sina Weibo with my own credentials, observed, recorded, and analysed conversations between netizens and government on official Weibo pages.

As regards the selection of study cases, I based my sources on the Chinese Academy of Social Science and the Online Public Opinion Monitoring Office of the *People's Daily*, which have been publishing annual reports on China's online public opinion recording of public incidents since 2007. Annual reports published between 2009 and 2014 served as a general guideline in my selection of the most significant cases where Weibo played an important role. In addition, I conducted seven interviews during fieldwork trips in Beijing and Guangdong province in the summer of 2014 related to this chapter. Interviewees included officials from the propaganda department in Guangdong province, officials and researchers in the Office for Letter and Calls of the Beijing Municipal Government, journalists managing government Weibo accounts, staff from Sina, as well as scholars in the field.

5.3. The Development of Weibo in China

Weibo, or microblogging, is the mini version of blogging and can be defined as a form of blogging that lets a person write brief text updates (usually no more than 200 characters) about his/her life and send them to friends through text messaging, instant messaging, email or the Internet (Finin et al. 2007). The introduction of the US-based Twitter to the general public worldwide in July 2006 marked the first major

280Xinhua News. 2015. 'Zhengwu Weibo chengwei xin changtai (Government Weibo becomes a new norm),' 29 January. http://news.xinhuanet.com/zgix/2015-01/29/c_133955732.htm (accessed 19 December 2015)

microblogging service launch and proved to be extremely popular. It attracted 94,000 users within eight months of its launch.²⁸¹ Internet users in mainland China were able to access Twitter for three years, until it was permanently blocked by the Chinese government in July 2009.²⁸²

The development of Weibo in China can be divided into two stages, 2007 to August 2009 and September 2009 until the present (Dou and Li eds 2011: 5-8). On 12 May 2007, Fanfou, the first Weibo service in China, was launched in Beijing by a co-founder of Renren Network, a Chinese copy of Facebook.²⁸³ The website design, layout, and function of Fanfou closely resembled Twitter. Enjoying a similar level of popularity as Twitter, Fanfou recorded one million users by the first half of 2009, with notable users including artist and political activist Ai Weiwei, technology corporation Hewlett-Packard, and the influential Guangzhou-based newspaper Southern Weekly.²⁸⁴

The period from 2007 to mid-2009 saw the first flourishing of Chinese Weibo, with several different Weibo services launched, most notably Digu, Jiwai, Tencent's Taotao and Zuosha (Dou and Li eds 2011). Two events—the 20th anniversary of the 4 June 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, and riots on 5 July 2009 in Urumqi, the capital of the Muslim dominated Xinjiang region—triggered the crackdown of these Weibo services by the party-state. When the Chinese government blocked overseas social media such as Facebook and Twitter (which led coverage in the early period of the riot) in an attempt to control the flow of undesirable information, Chinese netizens turned to Fanfou and other Chinese Weibo for information, as well as for political debates on the riot.²⁸⁵ Before long, Fanfou, Jiwai and Digu became inaccessible, while China's state media laid the accusation that the Weibo services 'had been used to spreading misinformation about the unrest'.²⁸⁶ Although Fanfou, Jiwai and Digu were eventually allowed back in business later, their dominance of the market had been overtaken by new comers, Sina Weibo in particular, which marked the end of the first phase of China's Weibo development.

The abrupt closure of three popular Weibo services left a market vacuum, and provided a golden opportunity for Sina, China's largest Internet portal site. With ten years' experience in blogs, news and online forums, Sina launched its own Weibo service on 14 August 2009, one month after the riot in Xinjiang. It has been reported that Sina received backing from Beijing thanks in part to its previous record of compliance with the government's censorship regulations to keep sensitive content off its websites (Ramzy 2011). The reasons why Sina was chosen to pioneer the microblogging market after the Xinjiang riot can be attributed to three factors.²⁸⁷ Firstly, according to the Internet traffic monitoring agency Alexa, Sina was already one of the top 20 websites in the world, which gave it an advantage in building the

281Mike Snider, 2007. 'Sites for social butterflies' USA TODAY. 6 May. http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/tech/webguide/2007-05-28-social-sites_N.htm (accessed 20 April 2013)

282 The Telegraph Online. 2009. 'China riots: Twitter and YouTube frustrate censorship attempts,' 6 July. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/5756766/China-riots-Twitter-and-YouTube-frustrate-censorship-attempts.html> (accessed 20 April 2013)

283Xinhua Net. 2013. 'Zhongguo Weibo bizu fanou, shangneng fanfou' (Can Fanfou, the founding father of Chinese microblogging, survive) 25 March. http://news.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2013-03/25/c_124499133.htm (accessed 20 April 2013)

284Fanfou. 2009. 'Recommended users of Fanfou'. 27 April. <http://blog.fanfou.com/2009/04/> (accessed 20 April 2013)

285Li Puman. 2009. 'Fanfou, Fanfou, can we see Fanfou?' 11 July. From Li Puman's blog, translated by China Digital Times. <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2009/07/li-puman-fanfou-fanfou-can-we-see-fanfou/> (accessed 13 March 2013)

286Lin, Shujuan. 2009. 'Flutter over new Twitter.' *China Daily*, 22 October. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2009-10/22/content_8829406.htm (accessed 13 March 2015)

287Epstein, Gady. 2011. 'Sina Weibo.' *Forbes Asia Magazine*. 14 March. http://www.forbes.com/global/2011/0314/features-charles-chao-twitter-fanfou-china-sina-Weibo_2.html (accessed 14 March 2015)

immense user base for microblogging. Secondly, Sina has had a decade of experience in content monitoring, which gives the party-state an assurance that it will prevent the recurrence of unregulated spread of information, such as during the 2009 riots in Xinagjiang. Thirdly, Sina's CEO Charles Chao (also know as *Cao Guowei*) is close friends with President Hu Jintao's son-in-law, Mao Daolin, who was once the CEO of Sina.

Differently from Fanfou, Sina Weibo did not clone the model of Twitter, and instead introduced new functions and applications for Chinese users. Sina Weibo users could not only repost or relay other users' messages, but could also comment on them, and upload photos and videos besides text. Sina invited many Chinese celebrities to become its first group of users, thus increasing its publicity and popularity. Sina Weibo registered one million users within three months and ten million by 28 April 2010 (Dou and Li eds 2011).

The huge success of Sina Weibo encouraged other Chinese Internet portals to follow suit in the first half of 2010, when Sohu and NetEase launched their Weibo services in January; Tencent in March; and Sohu in April. While Weibo markets are dominated by these portal sites, other news websites, multi-media sites, and online forums have introduced Weibo services. In addition to commercial websites, the CCP's central media, *People's Daily* and *Xinhua News Agency* have also launched Weibo services in 2010 and 2011 respectively. This is when the Weibo market in China entered its second stage of development, highly competitive, and under the watchful eye of the government (Dou and Li eds 2011). There are about ten Weibo services provided by different companies, some commercial, others by the state media²⁸⁸. The case studies chosen for this research were drawn from Sina Weibo, the most popular choice among government apparatuses and individual officials.

As Weibo got increasingly popular among Chinese netizens, the influence of public opinion leaders and celebrities on Weibo also grew. Those so-called 'Big Vs' enjoyed millions of followers who read, commented and reposted their outpouring of news and opinions, many of which were very critical towards the party-state. Worried about their hold on public opinion, the Chinese authorities launched a nationwide campaign in the summer of 2013 to crack down on bloggers. Hundreds of Weibo users, including many 'Big Vs' with over 10 million followers, were arrested on charges of concocting and spreading false and often politically damaging claims.²⁸⁹ By courting and intimidating the Big Vs, the authorities have attempted to control the online public square.

5.4. Literature Review

There have been a number of publications on the influence and evolution of trends in online social media on Western networks (Asur et al. 2011; Kempe and Tardos 2005; Leskovec and Kleinberg 2005). Weibo, as the latest social media platform to gain extensive popularity in China, has attracted attention from scholars as well. Much of the Western-based literature on Chinese social media focuses on the

288Sina Weibo Data Centre. <http://data.Weibo.com/> (accessed 20 April 2013)

289□Buckley, Christopher. 2013. 'Crackdown on Bloggers Is Mounted by China,' 10 September.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/11/world/asia/china-cracks-down-on-online-opinion-makers.html?mcubz=1>

censorship implemented by the CCP (e.g. Bamman et al. 2012; Benney 2013; King et al. 2013; Knockel, et al. 2011; MacKinnon 2008, 2009; and Villeneuve 2008).

Bamman et al. (2013) conducted a large-scale analysis of deletion practices on Sina Weibo in order to identify keywords that are highly salient in real public discourse. The research found that posts containing politically sensitive terms, and terms whose sensitivity is shaped by current events, lead to a higher likelihood for the messages to be deleted. On the contrary, MacKinnon's (2009) study on how Chinese blog service providers censor user-generated content suggests that domestic censorship is very decentralized, with wide variance between different Internet companies, which results in a large amount of politically sensitive content being available in the Chinese blogosphere. Another systematic analysis of the censorship of millions of social media messages on 1,400 different social media services all over China has found that posts criticising the party-state are not necessarily more likely to be deleted (King et al. 2013). Their study demonstrates that the CCP's censorship program is aimed at restricting collective action by suppressing comments that represent, reinforce, or promote social mobilisation, regardless of content.

Other scholars place less emphasis on the control side and attempt to look at Weibo from perspectives different from censorship. Sullivan (2012) rightly observes that Sina Weibo has become a contested force in Chinese politics, exposing government scandals and mobilising online public opinion. Likewise, Tong and Lei (2013) also point out that the CCP is losing ideological hegemony due to the emergence of the microblogosphere. Although the authors briefly acknowledge that the government follow the tide of technology and have started to set up institutional Weibo accounts, they conclude that the party-state has yet to find an effective way to deal with the 'overwhelming liberal tendency' in the microblogosphere (2013: 311). Sullivan (2014: 30) instead argues that although netizen-led initiatives have facilitated the mobilisation of online public opinion and forced the CCP to intervene to redress acts of lower level malfeasance, the party-state has enhanced its capacity to direct public opinion, and has shown flexibility in governance reform to 'pre-empt' widespread demands for greater liberalisation. With regards to Weibo, Sullivan (2014) acknowledges that among the instruments used to achieve this goal, the party-state has developed an extensive web presence to communicate directly with netizens. Nonetheless, he stops short of providing empirical research on how the government actually utilises Weibo to guide public opinion. While I agree with Sullivan's (2012, 2014) general argument, this chapter examines how the party-state mobilise public support with the help of empirical studies of government Weibo accounts.

Yu et al. (2011) examined how trends are formed, and what kind of sources dominate the topics of discussion in Chinese social media by identifying and collecting the subjects that are popular on Sina Weibo over time, and then comparing them with similar trending topic data from Twitter. Their study found that Chinese netizens use Sina Weibo to share jokes, images and videos, and a large proportion of posts are relays of media contents. Hassid (2012) observes that Sina Weibo users are more likely to discuss issues concerning their own day-to-day activities, such as food, health and beauty, and are less engaged in social issues. Yu et al. (2011) and Hassid's (2012) research suggest that Chinese Weibo users are not generally interested in political issues. This is probably partly due to the censorship imposed by the CCP, which forced netizens to avoid political sensitive topics. In that sense, the control methods employed by

the CCP seem to be successful. Nevertheless, as I suggested earlier, censorship is one side of the coin; the party-state also proactively utilise Weibo to guide online public opinion.

Instead of focusing on suppression methods, Schlæger and Jiang (2014) and Noesselt (2014) examine how the government make use of Weibo as a governance tool, which is similar to my approach. Schlæger and Jiang (2014) argue that government Weibo is an extension of sophisticated e-government efforts to handle social discontent. They examine government Weibo from the perspective of local governance and through the case study of a municipal government Weibo, suggesting that government Weibo provide public services and surveillance functions. The authors point out that there has been no fundamental change to local decision-making or power arrangements. Rather than changing the power relations in Chinese local governance, government Weibo reinforce it (2014: 206). While the main focus of their study is directed at changes in local governance through a single case study, this chapter provides a larger picture of state–citizen interactions on Weibo. Noesselt (2014) suggests that the Chinese party-state has been adapting its governance strategy by integrating Weibo into their new public management strategy in order to maintain legitimacy. Her research points out that government Weibo failed to foster better interaction between the state and society, thus failing to win netizen support. On the contrary, I argue in this chapter that there has been increasing interaction between the state and society via Weibo, though its effectiveness in winning support from netizens is hard to measure.

5.5. The Role of Weibo in the Formation of Public Opinion

Similarly to online public opinion disseminated via other social media, Weibo has increasingly become an important source of news of social discontent, one that could undermine the CCP's legitimacy if it fails to handle the threat properly. As of March 2017, Sina Weibo's active monthly users reached 340 million.²⁹⁰ According to McKinsey, China has the world's most active social media population, with 91% of Chinese netizens interviewed saying that they visited a social-media site in the last six months.²⁹¹ By comparison, that figure is 70% in South Korea, 67% in the United States, and 30% in Japan.²⁹²

Studies conducted by scholars in China suggest that more than 73% of Weibo users consider microblogs as their main source of news. Expressing thoughts and opinions by posts is the most common behaviour among Weibo users, which accounts for 74.3% (Yin 2011). The same as Twitter members, a Weibo user can post anything without prior approval from the party-state. A post on Weibo can be forwarded by followers within seconds, and reaches tens of thousands before it is detected and deleted. The proverbial saying among Chinese netizens is that 'with 100 thousand Weibo followers, your influence is equal to a local newspaper; with one million, a national newspaper; with 100 million, China's Central Television' (Dou and Li eds 2011: 3).

290BBC. 2017. 'Twitter user numbers overtaken by China's Sina Weibo', 17 May. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-39947442> (accessed 22 May 2017)

291China Internet Watch. 2012. 'Social Media Has Greater Influence on Chinese Purchasing Decisions.' 23 May. <http://www.chinaInternetwatch.com/1459/social-media-purchasing-decision/> (accessed 10 March 2013)

292ibid.

Xiao Qiang, director of the China Internet Project at the University of California, Berkeley, points out that 'political participation, among other things, has taken a big step forward because of microblogging' (Ramzy 2011). A survey conducted by state media shows that 71% of interviewees believe Weibo enhanced their interest in politics and 61% that they are more likely to participate in political discussion due to the development of Weibo.²⁹³ By the first half of 2011, Weibo had surpassed online forums to become the second most important publisher of news of public incidents, after traditional news media, with 18% of the most discussed issues exposed by Weibo users (Dou and Li eds. 2011: 3). Some of the scandals resulted in the dismissal of government officials.

One of the most notable public incidents reported on Weibo was the high-speed train collision near Wenzhou, Zhejiang province, in July 2011. While the state media remained silent immediately after the crash that killed at least 40 people, a Sina Weibo user posted from the crash scene four minutes after the accident. More and more Weibo users followed suit, calling for help by posting online. Embarrassed by the deadly accident, the government, which considered the high-speed train to be a symbol of the nation's growing technological competence, imposed censorship, restricting news coverage of the event (Wines and LaFraniere 2011). As traditional media was unable to question the truth behind the crash, netizens used Weibo to challenge state controls.²⁹⁴ Given the tight control on the Internet, it seems quite unusual that the CCP tolerated the criticism from netizens that had flooded Weibo, which was mostly directed at the Ministry of Railways. A possible explanation is that Railways Minister Liu Zhijun was sacked for alleged corruption earlier that year, which placed the Railways Ministry under consistent pressure, and prevented Beijing from wanting to get involved. The Wenzhou train crash incident provided a unique opportunity to showcase the important role that Weibo could play in defiance of state media and to help the spread of information by ordinary netizens.

Another significant incident of public discontent where Weibo played a critical role was the self-immolation of a family in Yihuang county, Jiangsu province. In September 2010, three members of the Zhong family set themselves on fire in front of the county office in protest of the forced demolition of their home. When the self-immolation failed to convince the county government to back down, two of the Zhong sisters decided to fly to Beijing to submit a petition, but were stopped at the local airport by dozens of officials from Yihuang county. Trapped in the airport bathroom, the sisters contacted friends and netizens by mobile phone, calling for help. A number of journalists, including Deng Fei, who has over one million followers, picked up the news and live cast the event on Weibo. Every post was forwarded by other users over a thousand times.²⁹⁵ Deng Fei estimated that his live cast was followed by more than one million Weibo users.²⁹⁶ With the arrival of a group of journalists at the airport, county officials agreed to open dialogue with the Zhong family. A day later, the youngest sister of the Zhong family also opened her own account on Tencent Weibo to offer updates, and attracted tens of thousands of followers. Seven officials

293Global Times. 2011. 'Weibo rang zhongguo wangmin geng guanzhu zhengzhi (Weibo makes Chinese people pay more attention to politics),' 13 April.

<http://poll.huanqiu.com/news/2011-04/1627145.html> (accessed 14 March 2013)

294Buckley, Chris. 2011. 'China train crash censorship scorned on internet.' Reuters. 1 August.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/01/us-china-train-censorship-idUSTRE7700ET20110801> (accessed 14 March 2015)

295Lianhe Zaobao. 2010. 'Yihuangxian shuji jichang du shangfangzhe nvce gongfang Weibo zhibo (WeiboWeibo live cast of female toilet siege between Yihuang county party secretary and petitioners),' 17 September.

<http://www.zaobao.com/wencui/2010/09/longhoo100917.shtml> (accessed 14 March 2013)

296Yunnan Xinxi News. 2010. 'Yihuang chaiqianhu shangfang beijing bei guanyuan zhuzhi (Yihuang demolition family petition to Beijing was blocked by official),' 17 September.

http://nf.nfdaily.cn/ynxx/content/2010-09/17/content_15987522.htm (accessed 14 March 2013)

from Yihuang county were punished by the provincial party committee for mishandling the demolition; both party secretary and county governor were dismissed. The Yihuang incident demonstrates that when the traditional means of petition is blocked, Weibo could provide a vital channel for local grievances to be heard by a top official.

While the two examples mentioned above were some of the most reported incidents, there have been numerous minor cases where Weibo has acted as a new medium between the general public, the state, and news providers. The rapid development of Weibo in China since 2009 poses both challenges and opportunities to the party-state. Describing the Internet as a whole, Jiang (2010b) suggests that the Chinese government consciously allows the public a limited amount of freedom on issues of economic, social, and political affairs in order to reduce social discontent, and to channel online public opinion towards support of government policies and agendas. Jiang's observation is particularly true in the government's approach to Weibo, where it actively participates and engages with netizens.

5.6. Government Weibo as a Tool for Public Opinion Guidance

With the rapid growth in the number of Weibo users, and given its increasing popularity as a platform to express opinion among netizens, Chinese leaders eventually recognised the positive impacts of Weibo and the importance of Weibo in the CCP's propaganda strategy. The Annual Report On China Microblog 2012, which was edited by the Internet Information Office of Beijing's Propaganda Department, suggests that Weibo has become an important platform for the public to exercise their rights of scrutiny, as well as for the government to innovate its methods of ruling (Beijing Internet Information Office ed. 2013). According to the 2012 report, the constructive interactions between the public and the state help to maintain stability and promote the development of the society. As the Minister of Public Security stated at a national police workshop, 'we should master the use of Weibo to improve our interaction with the people, to hear their complaints and criticisms and to provide better services.'²⁹⁷ Weibo can thus be seen as an unusually agile, responsive, and creative effort by the CCP to maintain its legitimacy.²⁹⁸ With this in mind, the party-state encouraged government offices and party organs to open Weibo accounts, the majority with Sina.

In order to assist government officials to better understand social media, the Central Party School Publishing House has published a whole series of books on how to manage the Internet in an innovative way. The first series consists of five books dedicated to Weibo, covering topics such as instructions for government offices on how to set up Weibo accounts, a practical manual on running government Weibo microblogs, and crisis management via Weibo. In fact, the party-state's publishing houses have issued numerous monographs that teach officials how to set up and manage government Weibo accounts to

²⁹⁷China Daily. 2011. 'Police in China tweet to change stern-faced image.' 5 January.

http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2011-01/05/content_11795216.htm (accessed 14 May 2013)

²⁹⁸ Holbig (2010) suggests that economic performance, democracy, good governance, ideology and nationalism as the unusually agile, responsive, and creative effort., Heike Holbig. 2010. In Search of Legitimacy in Post-revolutionary China:Bringing Ideology and Governance Back In. GIGA WP 127/2010

www.giga.hamburg.de/workingpapers (accessed 20 May 2013)

engage the public. The state publishers include the Chinese Academy of Social Science Publishing House, the People's Publishing House, Hongqi Publishing House, the People's Daily Press, Xinhua Publishing House at the central level, and Shanghai People's Press and Zhejiang People's Press at the provincial level. This variety of state publishers indicates that the CCP pays high attention to the importance of official Weibo use. As the People's Daily Press points out, making good use of Weibo allows the government to solve problems that concern netizens, and to improve the state's image (People's Daily Online Monitoring Office 2013).

Wang Chen, director of the State Internet Information Office and deputy director of the Propaganda Department, points out that the party must guarantee the development of a healthy and upright online culture, must manage public opinion channeling on the Internet, and enhance the control of social media and real-time communication tools.²⁹⁹ A general from the People's Liberation Army additionally warns that the CCP Central Committee attaches great importance to the construction of ideology on the Internet, but that the situation is not optimistic, as Weibo became a platform for the spread of anti-establishment ideas, as well as an important battlefield for 'colour revolution.'³⁰⁰ He urges the party to strengthen control on Weibo by filtering and censoring information, advocates 'positive propaganda,' and the consolidation of Weibo public opinion guidance by better integrating Weibo accounts of the state, media outlets, and scholars.³⁰¹

The department in charge of Internet propaganda—the State Internet Information Office—held a conference in September 2012 to discuss how to better utilise social media among different government departments in order to improve service to society, communicate with citizens, guide public opinion, and promote the 'healthy development of social media'.³⁰² The conference acknowledged Weibo as an important force for public opinion guidance, and called for the government to develop Weibo progressively; use Weibo to bridge the gap between governance and accountability; strengthen the interaction with netizens; release credible information in a timely manner; be responsive to social concerns; and properly channel urgent issues on the Internet.³⁰³

Following the active promotion of government Weibo at the central level, some of the local governments responded positively. Nanhai district of Foshan city, Guangdong province, was the very first government at the county level to set up Weibo accounts. An official from the Propaganda Department of Foshan admitted during an interview with me that the government was to some extent forced to shift its propaganda work on the Internet due to the increasing pressure of online public opinion.³⁰⁴ 'As the traditional media is under tight control, the public moved to the Internet to express their anger...We have to make a move along with the people,' the official said. He acknowledged that the use of Internet leads to

299Wang, Chen. 2011. 'Jiji kaizhan Weibo yulun yindao gongzuo (Actively Carry Out Weibo Public Opinion Guidance Work),' People's Daily Online, 28 November.

<http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/8198/235803/index.html> (accessed 7 June 2015)

300Taikung Pao. 2013. 'Guofang Daxue Jiaoshou: Weibo yi chengwei jidian ji fantizhi yanlun de jisandi (Professor of Defence University: Weibo has become distribution center for extreme and anti-establishment idea).' 9 June.

<http://news.takungpao.com/hk/mainland/focus/2013-06/1679117.html> (accessed 9 June 2013)

301ibid.

302Xinhua Net. 2012. 'Guojia hulianwang xinxiaban kaihui tuidong shejiao wangluo jiankang fazhan (State Internet Information Office holds conference advocates the healthy development of social media).' 9 September. http://news.xinhuanet.com/tech/2012-09/09/c_123691215.htm (accessed 1 June 2013)

303□ibid.

304□ Interview with an official from the Propaganda Department of Foshan, Guangdong province, China. Interview conducted in Foshan on 4 August 2015.

a more lively and more innovative society, and that the government should be more open and encourage its development. 'The CCP's control methods of the media have been undergoing transformation. Besides control, we also need to serve the netizens, under scrutiny of the netizens, be more accountable to the taxpayers...We, the Propaganda Department, should lead the way in promoting *wangluo wenzheng*,' the official concluded. This official from Guangdong province was not the only one to realise the importance of social media in promoting good governance. The official and researcher from the Office of Letters and Calls of Beijing that I interviewed also expressed similar views, believing that Internet technology has brought both challenges and opportunities to the party-state.³⁰⁵

By 2012, a total of 176,700 Weibo accounts had been opened by government departments and individual officials on the four major domestic Weibo service providers (Sina, Tencent, People's Daily, and Xinhua), a 250% increase compared with the previous year.³⁰⁶ Sina Weibo eventually became the government's main choice, with 152,390 government accounts recorded by the end of 2015, including 37,684 set up by individual officials.³⁰⁷ Those setting up Weibo accounts include CCP committees, government departments, courts and prosecutors, as well as committees of the local People's Congress and political advisory bodies. More than 20 departments at the ministerial level have opened accounts on Sina Weibo, including Commerce, Culture, Foreign Affairs, Health, and Public Security.³⁰⁸ Among state departments, the police have been leading the way in setting up accounts on Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo, with 4,000 police bureaus and 5,000 police officers registered.³⁰⁹ The Beijing municipal government has over 14.8 million followers on Weibo, which allows for the spread of messages, information on missing people, or recent crimes in a quick manner and on a broad scale.³¹⁰

The party-state considers posts and status updates via Weibo as a means of relaxing strained relations between the state and the public by allowing officials to communicate at a grassroots level.³¹¹ Officials use government Weibo accounts to hold online conferences, solicit public opinion concerning public interests such as traffic rules, visa applications, household registrations, and fire prevention. In regards to what government Weibo use should achieve, the vice-president of the Central Party School lists several advantages including: 1) Publish official information timely and accurately to prevent the spread of rumour. In the event of major incidents, being the first to release official information instead of allowing the circulation of unofficial versions is the key to guiding public opinion in the government's favour; 2) Provide a new platform to interact with the public, receive complaints, and answer queries; 3) By following netizens' opinion trends on Weibo, the government forms a better understanding of citizens' thoughts, thus helping the state in its decision-making; 4) Disseminate information via government Weibo accounts is more cost-effective than through government websites, since Weibo microblogs are hosted by

305Interviews with official A and researcher B from the Office of Letters and Calls of Beijing CCP Committee and Beijing Municipal Government. August 2015.

306Li, Yongchun. 2013. 'Number of Gov't Weibo Accounts Soars,' Caixin Online. 28 March. <http://english.caixin.com/2013-03-28/100507640.html> (accessed 19 May 2015)

307Southern Metropolitan Daily. 2016. 'Guangdong yueju zhengwu weibo diyi dasheng (Guangdong becomes number one province in terms of government weibo)', 19 January.

http://epaper.oeeee.com/epaper/G/html/2016-01/19/content_5095.htm (accessed 2 February 2016)

308People's Daily Public Opinion Monitoring Office. 2012. 'Annual report of government account on Sina Weibo 2012,' December. Available at <http://yuqing.people.com.cn/NMediaFile/2012/1203/MAIN201212031436000123338318108.pdf> (accessed 7 June 2013)

309Ministry of Public Security. 2011. 'Gonganbu zai Beijing juxing Weibo huiyi Minister of Public Security held police Weibo conference in Beijing.' 26 September.

http://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2011-09/26/content_1957013.htm (accessed 14 March 2013)

310Yin, Yeping. 2012. 'Weibo frontiers.' *Global Times*, June 25. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/716896.shtml> (accessed 12 April 2013)

311People's Daily Public Opinion Monitoring Office. 2012. 'Annual report of government account on Sina Weibo 2012.'

commercial service providers, while official pages are run by the CCP; 5) Communicating with netizens in real-time as public incidents occur is more likely to minimise social disorder, therefore maintaining social stability. (Dou and Li eds. 2012: Prologue 3-4). Party School officials' comments above indicate that the party-state recognises the potential of using Weibo not only for propaganda purposes, but also as a feedback mechanism and new platform for mutual engagement.

The proactive use of Weibo is seen as a common governance measure by officials in a variety of capacities. Reflecting on the success of his Weibo account, the mayor of Kunming summarised a few key contributing factors, such as 1) the release of official versions of information as soon as possible; 2) acting as a bridge connecting the government and netizens; 3) addressing netizen complaints through interaction with the public; and 4) paying attention to public opinion trends on Weibo.³¹² The party-state published a book that teaches government offices and party departments how to manage Weibo, which echoes Kunming mayor's reflections. It states three advantages of having a government Weibo: 1) Mobilise public support. A number of pressing events showed that public opinion on Weibo is exceptionally active, which can help the government to understand the needs of the masses and their suggestions for resolution, in turn leading to the implementation of policies that can better serve the people. 2) Improve the relationship between party officials and the public. Weibo provides a more equal and friendlier platform than the alternatives, which facilitates the interaction between the state and society to reduce mutual misunderstanding due to the burdens of bureaucracy. Through the lively touch of Weibo, the image of party organs and officials can be improved, therefore removing the barrier between the two sides. 3) Better governance. The state can better promote e-governance and guide public opinion through Weibo (Dou and Li eds. 2011: 24). This section illustrated that the government not only treats Weibo as a propaganda tool, but it also actively seeks to maximise microblogging's potential to improve e-governance.

5.7. Structured and Work Flow of Government Weibo

The following section will examine how the Chinese party-state works to manage government Weibo in a systematic way. Similarly to government Internet commentators, we have seen in an earlier chapter that the staff responsible for government Weibo accounts are also drawn from within the party-state's departments. Extending the government spokesperson and press office, the Beijing municipal government established a specialised team dedicated to the management of its government Weibo accounts. In order to familiarise themselves with microblogging, all staff involved have to undergo special training on how to set up Weibo accounts, how to post, how to reply, and how to repost. Staff members from Sina Weibo, which hosts government Weibo accounts, provide additional one-on-one training and guidance to the government Weibo team.³¹³

312 Sina News. 2013. 'Kunming shizhang Weibo bairi (One hundred days of Kunming mayor's Weibo),' 26 August. <http://qcyn.sina.com.cn/news/ynyw/2013/0826/110637153833.html?qq-pf-to=pcqq.c2c> (accessed 28 December 2015)

313 CCP News. 2011. 'Beijing shi jiang jian zhuanmen tuandui guanli zhengwu Weibo (Beijing establishes specialised team responsible managing government Weibo),' 6 December. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64093/64387/16504650.html> (accessed 20 December 2015)

Following Beijing's example, the Weibo team of Gaoming district, Shenzhen was picked from members of the government spokesperson's office. The first 27 local government offices to set up Weibo accounts established Weibo management teams comprising 60 total staff, with the size of each Weibo team varying from two to seven.³¹⁴ The core of a Weibo team consists of assistant spokespersons and correspondents (*tongxunyuán*) of their respective departments (such as the Police Department and Bureau for Health and Family Planning), who are familiar with the work of their team, and who have experience in public relations. The staff composition aims to guarantee the efficiency of Weibo posting, and the quality of the content. Nonetheless, the majority of the staff in Weibo teams are not assigned full-time to microblogging, but are multi-tasked with other responsibilities. 19 of them are assistant spokespersons of government websites, which means that they are also responsible for receiving and replying to netizens' complaints and enquiries posted on local government portals.³¹⁵

Ping'an Beijing (Peaceful Beijing), the official Weibo account of the Beijing Police Department, was set up and maintained by 12 police officers, mostly young officers in their 20s familiar with the Internet. They were divided into four teams, taking shifts in order to keep the account operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week. After a six months' trial, the team was restructured and three police officers, two male and one female, were assigned to the running of *Ping'an Beijing* during daytime. The Beijing Police team posts interact with netizens, answer questions, and organise activities, both online and offline. Night shifts are handled by two male officers in addition to three male officers from the news centre. (Dou and Li eds. 2012: 49)

Nanhai Fabu is the Weibo account of the Information Office of Nanhai district, Foshan city, in Guangdong. Since the government Information Office is also the CCP Propaganda Department, which oversees all media in Foshan, including the *Foshan Daily*, the Weibo account of Nanhai Fabu is operated by journalists from *Foshan Daily*.³¹⁶ During my visit, I noticed that instead of being located in the government building, *Nanhai Fabu* can be found in the office of the *Foshan Daily's* online news department. An editor and an online journalist were assigned to look after the content of *Nanhai Fabu* in addition to their routine duty at the newspaper. The editor told me that although they are the mouthpiece of the Propaganda Department, they try to post less political propaganda content and more posts related to citizens' daily life, such as notifications of government policies regarding the narrowing income gap, and the ban of motorbikes due to environmental concerns.

The Weibo account of the Guangdong provincial police bureau is managed by a team of young officers in their 20s, who tweet in the vernacular to reach the younger generation of Internet users.³¹⁷ As for the Weibo account of the Tourism Bureau of Zhejiang province, '*Zhejiangsheng Lvyouju*,' it consists of three full-time staff, two of whom have bachelor degrees, while the third was a university intern. Between 8:30 am and 10:30 am daily, they take turns in managing the account content, as well as in responding to

314 Nanfang Daily. 2012. 'Gaoming shouge zhengwu Weibo qun shangxian (Gaoming launches its first government Weibo group),' 31 May. Republished on Shenzhen Government online http://www.szzw.gov.cn/xxgk/gkml/xyd/201205/t20120531_1919601.htm (accessed 20 December 2015)

315 Ibid.

316 Interview with an official in Foshan Propaganda Department and two journalists at Foshan Daily. Interview conducted in August 2015 in Nanhai, Guangdong province, China.

317 China Daily. 2011. 'Police in China tweet to change stern-faced image.' January 5. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2011-01/05/content_11795216.htm (accessed 14 March 2013)

netizens' queries and in coordinating with the Weibo accounts of other government offices. They have a well-planned daily schedule, and post specific items at pre-set times. Two special topics are published each week. They also launched an app for mobile phone users in conjunction with the IT department. (Dou and Li eds. 2012: 62-63).

Many government offices use a structured workflow that guides their Weibo posting and account management practices. The government of Gaoming district, Shenzhen, for example, imposes a strict review mechanism for posts published on Weibo accounts. Each post, regardless of whether it is original or reposted, has to be drafted or proposed by the staff on duty, and then submitted to his or her superior for approval. Only when this is granted by the upper levels of management can a post be published.³¹⁸ The Weibo account of Kunming was run by the mayor himself, along with staff drawn from the municipal government office, and from the mayor's hotline and propaganda departments. The staff browse the Internet each day, collecting information about important issues raised by citizens of Kunming, then submit a brief report to the mayor, who will decide what to post on the account. Some of the posts are drafted or proposed by team members, while others are written by the mayor himself.³¹⁹

In Sichuan province, all Weibo accounts of the provincial government offices were incorporated in a dedicated website—www.scpublic.cn. Set up by the provincial news centre by order of the provincial Internet Information Office, operators of this special website post, operate, maintain, and manage the posts of provincial government office Weibo accounts.³²⁰ Although the objective of this policy is to provide a one-stop-shop Weibo service to netizens, it could compromise the independence of individual Weibo accounts, therefore undermining their effectiveness. For example, the target readers and interests of the Bureau of Statistics are different from the Education Department and should be treated accordingly. Using the same management standards across the board and irrespective of field could be detrimental to the interests of the public.

As we have seen in this section, each government department, and at different levels, set out their own guidelines regarding how to manage Weibo accounts. The advantage of this practice lies in its flexibility, as each department adopt solutions that best suit their circumstances. The disadvantage is the absence of nationwide standards and co-ordination, as I will explain later in this chapter.

5.8. Government Weibo as a Tool for e-governance

As we have seen in earlier sections, the party-state's intention is to use Weibo not only as a tool for propaganda, but also as an interactive platform to communicate with the public and to receive feedback,

318Nanfang Daily. 2012. 'Gaoming shouge zhengwu Weibo qun shangxian (Gaoming launches its first government Weibo group),' 31 May. Republished on Shenzhen Government online http://www.szzw.gov.cn/xxgk/gkml/xyd/201205/t20120531_1919601.htm (accessed 20 December 2015)

319Sina News. 2013. 'Kunming shizhang Weibo bairi (One hundred days of Kunming mayor's Weibo),' 26 August. <http://qcyn.sina.com.cn/news/ynyw/2013/0826/110637153833.html?qq-pf-to=pcqq.c2c> (accessed 28 December 2015)

320Sichuan Government. 2013. 'Sichuan sheng renmin zhengfu bangongting guanyu jiaqiang zhengwu Weibo yingyong de tongzhi (The Announcement of the Sichuan Provincial People's Government on enhancing government Weibo application),' 18 June. <http://www.sc.gov.cn/10954/11063/2013/11/22/10286390.shtml> (accessed 21 December 2015)

which essentially form the core of the *wangluo wenzheng* policy advocated by the CCP. Chinese scholars and state media have come up with a new term, '*Weibo wenzheng*,' in reference to how the government utilises Weibo as a social media platform to promote *wangluo wenzheng* (Li 2010, Li and Qin 2011, Liu 2013, Yang 2011, Zhou 2012). The English language state newspaper, *China Daily*, defines '*Weibo wenzheng*' as '(government offices and officials) seeking advice from the netizens via microblogging.'³²¹ Liu (2013: 81) defines '*Weibo wenzheng*' as a new Internet tool facilitated by Weibo, which enables party-state apparatuses, officials, and the general public to participate, discuss, and handle public issues. Yang (2011) suggests that '*Weibo wenzheng*' is a form of two-way e-participation, practically the same as e-governance and *wangluo wenzheng*. Li and Qin (2011) argue that after receiving suggestions from the public via Weibo, the government, be it an institution or individual official, should respond, reply, and deal with the issue in a timely manner. Doing so, the authors believe, will give the public direct and effective participation in legal decision-making.

With approval by the CCP's Organisation Department, the People's Publishing House made available a handbook titled '*Weibo Wenzheng and Handling Public Opinion*,' which aims to teach Chinese officials how to make good use of Weibo for *wangluo wenzheng* (Zhou 2012). In order to maximise the impact of *Weibo wenzheng*, the handbook details the processes that can be established via government Weibo to increase transparency, thus allowing the public a better understanding of the government's decision-making process, and providing opportunities for citizens to share their ideas and suggestions through direct interaction with officials.

As we have seen above, the Chinese party-state puts great emphasis on social media including Weibo as a new channel for propaganda and better governance. In the following section, I will examine specific government Weibo accounts to assess their success in four areas: 1) serve the public's interests; 2) interact with the public; 3) manage crisis and refute rumor; and 4) improve state image.

5.9. Government Weibo in Service to the Public Interest

Similarly to government portals and online message boards, government Weibo does not only serve the traditional scope of propaganda, but also the public's interests by helping and solving their needs, as we will see in the following two examples. A rainstorm in Beijing illustrated how the government could provide services to residents via Weibo, and the significance of cooperation between the state and netizens through microblogs. On 21 July 2012, Beijing experienced its heaviest rain in six decades, which killed more than 70 people and affected nearly two million residents.³²² Different departments of the Beijing municipal government used their Weibo accounts to actively release information and constantly update the latest developments regarding the disaster. From early morning on 21 July, the Water Bureau of Fangshan, Beijing started to release early warnings regarding the arrival of the rainstorm via its Weibo

321China Daily. 2011. 'How to say "Weibo wenzheng" in English?,' 23 February. http://language.chinadaily.com.cn/news/2011-02/23/content_12065069.htm (accessed 16 December 2015)

322Xinhua Net. 2012. 'Death toll from Beijing rainstorm climbs to 77.' 26 July. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-07/26/c_131741274.htm (accessed 5 June 2013)

account, and kept updating the weather forecast with the latest developments by relaying information from the Meteorological Bureau.³²³

In the meantime, netizens also exchanged information and asked for help by posting on the government's Weibo account.³²⁴ Weibo user Hengqin reported that more than one hundred primary school students were trapped by a landslide in Fangshan, Beijing, and the 110 emergency number was busy.³²⁵ The Beijing Fire Department quickly responded to her appeal and posted that 50 fire fighters had been sent to rescue the students.³²⁶ At 11:40 pm, a fireman at the scene posted that all students were safe, and his team were evaluating the structural damage of the school building.³²⁷ In another instance, the Haidian Police Department received a report from a Weibo user that a pregnant woman was having a miscarriage, and an ambulance had failed to reach her due to heavy rain. Two police officers arrived at her home and took her to hospital in the police car, saving her life.³²⁸

A netizen complained on the Weibo account of the director of the Beijing Information Office, Wang Hui, that even though his car was blocked due to rain, he still received a parking ticket. Wang immediately reported this to the deputy mayor in charge of the emergency unit, who then ordered the Traffic Department to recall the parking ticket.³²⁹ In a separate incident, a netizen posted on the Fangshan government Weibo account that a rumour spreading on Weibo referred to two hundred elderly people who were allegedly killed in a nursing home fire.³³⁰ The Fangshan Bureau of Civil Affairs promptly launched an investigation, and reported via Weibo that none of the 40 rest homes in Fangshan were affected, and not a single person was harmed.³³¹

The Beijing rainstorm case demonstrated the cooperation between the government and netizens via Weibo. On the one hand, government departments provided important information in a timely manner. On the other hand, the netizens reported first hand information and provided feedback that allowed the state to better respond to the disaster. The Beijing Information Office kept updating the latest developments related to the disaster, while its spokesperson responded to netizens' complaints. The Fire Department acted on reports received on its Weibo account, and posted its rescue operation on Weibo. Local offices of the Fangshan government answered to the public's concern and refuted rumours. The case studies

323 Shuirun Jinghua. 2012-7-21 09:15. Sina Weibo. http://e.Weibo.com/bjwatergov?ref=http://s.Weibo.com/Weibo/%25E6%25B0%25B4%25E6%25B6%25A6%25E4%25BA%25AC%25E5%258D%25E&Refer=STopic_box&key_word=%E6%9A%B4%E9%9B%A8%E9%BB%84%E8%89%B2%E9%A2%84%E8%AD%A6&is_search=1 (accessed 7 June 2013)

324 People's Daily Public Opinion Monitoring Office. 2012. 'Annual report of government account on Sina Weibo 2012,' December. Available at <http://yuqing.people.com.cn/NMediaFile/2012/1203/MAIN201212031436000123338318108.pdf> (accessed 7 June 2013)

325 Beijing Fire Department. 2012-7-21. Sina Weibo. http://e.Weibo.com/beijingxiaofang?ref=http://s.Weibo.com/Weibo/%E5%8C%97%E4%BA%AC%E6%B6%88%E9%98%B2?topnav&wvr=5&b=1&is_ori=1&is_forward=1&is_pic=1&is_video=1&is_music=1&is_text=1&key_word=%E5%8C%97%E4%BA%AC%E6%B6%88%E9%98%B2%E5%B7%B2%E8%B0%83%E6%B4%BE50%E4%BA%BA&end_time=2013-06-08&is_search=1 (accessed 4 June 2013)

326 ibid.

327 Beijing Fire Department. 2012-7-21 23:40. Sina Weibo. http://e.Weibo.com/beijingxiaofang?ref=http://s.Weibo.com/Weibo/%25E5%258C%2597%25E4%25BA%25AC%25E6%25B6%2588%25E9%2598%25B2&Refer=STopic_box&key_word=%E6%88%BF%E5%B1%B1%E5%B0%91%E5%B9%B4%E8%AD%A6%E6%A0%A1&is_search=1 (accessed 4 June 2013)

328 Ping'an Beijing. 2012-7-21 15:10. Sina Weibo http://e.Weibo.com/pinganbeijing?ref=http://s.Weibo.com/Weibo/%25E5%25B9%25B3%25E5%25AE%2589%25E5%258C%2597%25E4%25BA%25AC?&b=1&key_word=%E5%8C%97%E5%A4%AA%E5%B9%B3%E5%BA%84%E6%B4%BE%E5%87%BA%E6%89%80%E6%B0%91%E8%AD%A6%E9%83%AD%E6%99%93%E5%88%9A&is_search=1 (accessed 4 June 2013)

329 □ Beijing Wang Hui. 2012-7-22 19:19. Sina Weibo. http://www.Weibo.com/u/2439589765?key_word=%E5%90%89%E6%9E%97%E5%B7%B2%E8%B4%A3%E6%88%90%E5%B8%82%E4%BA%A4%E7%AE%A1%E5%B1%80%E5%A4%84%E7%90%86%E6%AD%A4%E4%BA%8B&is_search=1 (accessed 4 June 2013)

330 FunHill. 2012-7-23 15:42. Sina Weibo http://e.Weibo.com/bjfish?key_word=%E6%95%AC%E8%80%81%E9%99%A2&is_search=1 (accessed 4 June 2013)

331 ibid.

above are examples of how government Weibo can provide useful information and service to the public in the event of natural disasters.

The second example involves a top police officer using his Weibo account to rescue children. Weibo has additionally provided a new platform for netizens and government to coordinate and cooperate to prevent abduction, as well as to help rescue abducted children. Child abduction in China is not uncommon: at least two hundred thousand children are reported missing every year, with only 0.1% found, according to state media.³³² The director of the Ministry of Public Security's Anti-Abduction Office, Chen Shiqu, set up a Weibo account in December 2010 to combat child abduction. By April 2013, he attracted 5 million followers, collected eight thousand pieces of information, and rescued more than ten thousand abducted children and women.³³³ Chen aims to reply to every clue posted on his Weibo immediately, and launches an investigation on the same day. 'Given the vast numbers of Weibo users and the speedy transmission of information, Weibo is especially helpful in collecting information,' Chen comments.³³⁴

The first successful rescue of an abducted child with the help of Weibo took place in February 2011.³³⁵ The son of Peng Gaofeng was abducted in 2008, and in 2009 a well-known journalist posted the missing child's photo on his Weibo, urging netizens to provide relevant information if available. The case also came under the radar of Chen Shiqu's Weibo.³³⁶ In 2011, the child was eventually found with the help of police after a tip-off from a netizen who saw the appeal on Weibo. Peng posted on his Weibo his appreciation for the assistance from netizens and the local police departments.³³⁷ Following this incident, in June 2011, Chen received a message in his Weibo mailbox, reporting that many children had been kidnapped in Zunyi, Guizhou.³³⁸ Using detailed information provided by the informant, Chen coordinated the Guizhou police to launch an operation. He rescued 27 children and arrested 19 suspects.³³⁹

Not only did the police make efforts to fight abductions via Weibo: famous public figures also participated. In January 2011, Professor Yu Jianrong of the China Academy of Social Sciences set up a Weibo account called 'Saving child beggars with snapshots,' urging netizens to take photos of child beggars and to post them on the same account, hoping that some of the missing children could be identified by their parents.³⁴⁰ As of January 2016, that Weibo account has attracted over 230,000 followers and has become a platform for information exchange.³⁴¹ Those making use of it include Wang Yujing, a police officer from

332 People's Daily Online. 2013. 'Zuduan shuzi beihou de guaimai ertong shichang liantiao (Stop the market chain for children kidnapping).' 6 June.

<http://opinion.people.com.cn/n/2013/0606/c51863-21765695.html> (accessed 7 June 2013)

333 China.com. 2013. 'Chen Shiqu Weibo daguai zhaohui shangwan beigui fuer (Chen Shiqu has found more than ten thousand abducted children and women via Weibo anti-abduction).' 18 May.

http://news.china.com.cn/txt/2013-05/18/content_28862357.htm (accessed 6 June 2013)

334 *ibid.*

335 *Yangcheng Wanbao*. 2013. 'Zhiyuanzhe Peng Gaofeng: xunzhao gengduo de haizi (Volunteer Peng Gaofeng: rescue more children).' 12 March.

http://www.ycwb.com/ePaper/xkb/html/2013-03/12/content_105889.htm?div=0 (accessed 4 June 2013)

336 □ Chen Shiqu. 2011-2-9 01:48. Sina Weibo. http://www.Weibo.com/chenshiqu?key_word=%E5%BD%AD%E9%AB%98%E5%B3%B0&is_search=1#_rnd1370821288929 (accessed 4 June 2013)

337 Zhiyuanzhe Peng Gaofeng. 2011-2-9 00:44. Sina Weibo.

http://www.Weibo.com/u/1368260731?key_word=%E5%86%8D%E6%AC%A1%E6%84%9F%E8%B0%A2%E6%B7%B1%E5%9C%B3%E5%85%AC%E5%AE%89%E5%B1%80&is_search=1 (accessed 4 June 2013)

338 *Beijing Wanbao*. 2011. 'Chen Shiqu: yong Weibo daguai de ren (Chen Shiqu: fighting abduction via Weibo).' 7 December.

http://bjwb.bjd.com.cn/html/2011-12/07/content_25020.htm (accessed 4 June 2013)

339 □ *ibid.*

340 People's Daily Online. 2011. 'Weibo daguai xuezhe Yu Jianrong (Weibo anti-kidnapping scholar Yu Jianrong).' 11 March.

<http://media.people.com.cn/GB/40606/14115270.html> (accessed 8 June 2013)

341 □ Suishou paizhao jiejiu qitao ertong (Saving child beggars with snapshots). Sina Weibo. http://weibo.com/jiejiuqier?is_all=1 (accessed 23 January 2016)

Zhengjiang who has 2.6 million followers. He reposted pictures and information of 18 missing children on the Weibo page of 'Saving child beggars with snapshots,' hoping to maximise the impact of the campaign outreach.³⁴² Many local police bureaus across China, such as Guangdong and Jiangsu, also urge netizens to participate in abduction prevention.³⁴³

In a show of gratitude, Chen thanked netizens for their efforts during the campaign.³⁴⁴ Besides using Weibo as a platform for information exchange, Chen also re-posted news stories on abduction, and posted advice for parents and women on how to enhance awareness and protect their children from being abducted. In one of the posts, Chen reposted a story on how police rescued a missing girl, and urged parents to teach their children to memorize their home address and phone number, and to leave their contact details in the child's rucksack and personal belongings.³⁴⁵ In another post, he recommended the movie "Mang Shang" (Blind Mountain), about a woman who had been kidnapped and sold to a remote village as bride. 'The story was very powerful... you must try to seek help from the police if you are abducted,' Chen commented on his own post.³⁴⁶

The cases above show that Weibo can serve as a platform for netizens and government to cooperate. The state served better the needs of the public, while netizens contributed to the government's efforts in fighting abduction. In other words, government Weibo encourages e-participation by the public, and both state and society benefit.

5.10. Government Weibo in Public Interaction

The State's image can be improved by: engaging and interacting with the public in an honest manner, accepting responsibility, being accountable, and serving the public's interests, as the following three cases suggest. On 3 March 2012, a lady complained on Weibo that her brother had been killed 11 years before, and that the Police Department of Yuzhou, Henan province, had been reluctant to look into the case. Thirteen hours later, Yuzhou police (*Ping'an Yuzhou*) left two comments on her post, dismissing her case and accusing her of making groundless accusations in order to get publicity.³⁴⁷ The hasty response from the police quickly caught the attention of other netizens and was widely criticized as arrogant. Two days later, Yuzhou police posted a formal apology to the lady for the inappropriate comments made the day before, and promised to look into the death of her brother and to investigate the truth. In the past, it

342Wang Yujing. 2016-4-11 11:10. Sina Weibo. [http://weibo.com/337609555?](http://weibo.com/337609555?is_search=0&visible=0&is_all=1&is_tag=0&profile_ftype=1&page=4#feedtop)

[is_search=0&visible=0&is_all=1&is_tag=0&profile_ftype=1&page=4#feedtop](http://weibo.com/337609555?is_search=0&visible=0&is_all=1&is_tag=0&profile_ftype=1&page=4#feedtop) (accessed 12 April 2016)

343Xinhua Net. 2011. 'Weibo daguai bei zhiyi chengxu bu yanjing (The procedure of fighting abduction on Weibo is challenged)'. 8 February.

http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2011-02/08/c_121054303_2.htm?prolongation=1 (accessed 5 June 2013)

344Chen Shiqu. 2011-2-3 23:09. Sina Weibo.

http://www.Weibo.com/chenshiqu?key_word=%E5%8F%8D%E6%8B%90%E5%B7%A5%E4%BD%9C%E4%BB%BB%E5%8A%A1%E7%B9%81%E9%87%8D%E8%89%B0%E5%B7%A8&is_search=1#_rnd1370821288929 (accessed 5 June 2013)

345Chen Shiqu. 2013-4-11 20:06. Sina Weibo. http://www.Weibo.com/chenshiqu?key_word=%E8%A6%81%E5%A2%9E%E5%BC%BA%E9%98%B2%E6%8B%90%E6%84%8F%E8%AF%86&is_search=1#_rnd1370821288929 (accessed 4 June 2013)

346Chen Shiqu. 2012-11-17 16:28. Sina Weibo. http://www.Weibo.com/chenshiqu?key_word=%E8%A6%81%E5%A2%9E%E5%BC%BA%E9%98%B2%E6%8B%90%E6%84%8F%E8%AF%86&is_search=1#_rnd1370821288929 (accessed 4 June 2013)

347Sina Weibo. 2012. 'Pingan Yuzhou wei budang yanlun daoqian (Pingan Yuzhou apologised for inappropriate comments)'. 5 March. http://www.Weibo.com/u/1912841570?key_word=@%E5%B9%B3%E5%AE%89%E7%A6%B9%E5%B7%9E&is_search=1 (accessed 15 March 2013)

was highly unlikely that the police would accept responsibility for their wrongdoing, let alone publicly apologise to an ordinary citizen. Noticing their initial irresponsible behaviour through live feedback, the Yuzhou police swiftly corrected the mistake and openly admitted their misbehaviour, neutralizing a potential public relations disaster and restoring the image of the police.

The second case was in Ningxia autonomous region, where a Weibo user posted a message on the account of Yinchuan municipal government on 27 December 2011, revealing that a construction company in Yinchuan had delayed the payment of 15 workers. Twelve minutes after the initial post, Yinchuan municipal government forwarded the complaint to the municipal General Trade Union and Department of Human Resources and Social Security. The following morning, the Yinchuan General Trade Union ordered the local trade union to look into the case and to submit a report within three days. The local trade unions concerned acknowledged the case the same afternoon. The Department of Human Resources and Social Security responded the following day, on 29 December. Three days later, the local trade union posted that the dispute had been solved and that the workers had received their long delayed wages.³⁴⁸ Agencies at three administrative levels were involved, and yet the chain of command was smooth, with orders passed down via Weibo within hours or even minutes. The case was praised by Ningxia Daily, the party organ of the autonomous region, as an excellent example of good governance in which the government made the best use of Weibo to coordinate different agencies and to secure payment for the workers.

The third example shows that senior party officials could use Weibo to improve the state's image by interacting with the public in a caring manner. The father of a terminal cancer patient wrote an open letter to the Party Secretary of Shanghai asking the party-state to pay attention to the state of neglect of the health system, and to provide better caring services for terminally ill cancer patients. The letter was forwarded by a Weibo user to the Weibo page of the Shanghai Government Information Office. Within 24 hours, a letter signed by the Party Secretary was posted on the party-state's Weibo account that acknowledged the miserable conditions endured by patients and their families, and promised to improve the health care system.³⁴⁹ The reply was forwarded by more than 2,500 followers within an hour, with the majority of the comments praising the Party Secretary.³⁵⁰ Although the letter stops short of making any specific assurances, it was a wise public relations move, which demonstrated that the CCP cares about the people.

5.11. Government Weibo in Crisis Management and Refuting Rumour

Weibo can be used to handle government public relations crises. One of the most iconic examples is the 'photoshopped incident,' when officials in Huili county, Sichuan province, turned an embarrassing scandal

348Sina Weibo. 2012. 'Zhengwu Weibo wei renmin (Government Weibo devoted for the people).' 5 January.

http://www.Weibo.com/u/1912841570?key_word=%E6%94%BF%E5%8A%A1%E5%BE%AE%E5%8D%9A%E6%89%91%E8%BA%AB%E4%B8%BA%E6%B0%91&is_search=1 (accessed 15 March 2013)

349Sina Weibo. 2012. 'Yici gaoxiang zhencheng de guanmin duihua (A frank conversation between official and citizen via Weibo).' 29 February. http://www.Weibo.com/u/1912841570?key_word=%E4%B8%80%E6%AC%A1%E9%AB%98%E6%95%88%E7%9C%9F%E8%AF%9A%E7%9A%84%E5%AE%98%E6%B0%91%E5%AF%B9%E8%AF%9D&is_search=1 (accessed 15 March 2013)

350ibid.

into a marketing opportunity to promote this remote county by skilfully using Weibo. On 16 June 2011, the Huili government posted a news article with a photo on its official website, showing the county mayor inspecting a newly completed road with two other officials (See Figure 1 below). Ten days later, a netizen from Huili posted a commentary on one of the most popular online forums, Tianya, pointing out that the photo had been doctored by using computer software Photoshop. In the photo, three men can be seen floating above a road that does not match the background. The initial thread drew huge attention among netizens who believe that the officials did not visit the construction site, but pretended to be there by faking the photograph.



Illustration 5: Screenshot of the photo on Huili government website

To the embarrassment of Huili government, the photo was not only widely distributed on the Internet, there was also a huge number of parodies created by netizens, such as showing the three inspectors surrounded by dinosaurs, attending the Yalta Conference, and landing on the moon, all with the intention to ridicule the county officials. The Huili government apologised the following day on Tianya forum, where

the original thread was posted, but with little effect. It then opened an official account on Sina Weibo and posted three posts within 15 minutes. The first post apologised for publishing a photoshopped picture; the second one attached an apology letter, said to be written by Sun Zhengdong, the employee who doctored the picture; and the third post attached two original photos which had not been photoshopped.

The three posts were forwarded by over twenty thousands followers and attracted tens of thousands of views in total. Many criticized the Huili government for attempting to fool the public by posting a fake photo. Others questioned why Sun Zhengdong had been made the scapegoat. There were also voices praising the authorities for having the courage to accept responsibility and to face the public directly via Weibo. Meanwhile, Sun Zhengdong opened a personal account on Sina Weibo on the same day, not only posting the same apology letter, but also re-publishing netizens' parodied photos, with comments such as 'our leaderships must have been feeling tired for "floating" around the world and crossing different ages.'³⁵¹ Sun also posted that he was trying hard to improve his Photoshop skills and urged netizens to take an interest in the beautiful landscape and rich history of this remote county in southwest China. Contrary to the stereotype of a government employee, the tone of Sun's posts were full of humour and mixed with slang commonly used by Chinese netizens, which made a favourable impression on the public.³⁵²

A few days later, the Huili government posted a post with twelve photos promoting tourism, and emphasised, with humour, that those photos had not been photoshopped. The deputy director of the external propaganda office in the county acknowledged that 'it was a shameful incident, but we felt we should face it frankly rather than shying away.'³⁵³ The openness of the officials won the applause of the public and attention was soon redirected to tourism, as many netizens started to post or share information regarding the history, culture, environment, and tourism of this previously little known county. 'Huili' became one of the most searched key words on Weibo as well as on the Internet, and a tour group bound for this remote county was organized by netizens on Sina.com. The county office was overwhelmed by phone calls from the media, not to demand answers regarding the doctored picture, but asking how it managed to handle the public relations disaster in such a positive way.

By making good use of Weibo, the Huili government turned the tide of online public opinion. Initially set against the party-state, officials changed the narrative so that the public would have an interest in the county's tourism resources, resolving the crisis within 48 hours as a result. It has been widely considered by Chinese media and the public relations industry as a classic example of successful public opinion guidance. A commentary from the Xinhua News Agency appreciated that Huili county did not follow the 'standard procedure'—denial, defence, and deletion—adopted by most local governments when facing public opinion crises, and instead resolved the crisis with wisdom.³⁵⁴ Firstly, the county officials acknowledged that it was wrong to publish a photoshopped picture on its government website, and

351 People's Daily Online. 2012. 'Shanyong Weibo jian du shehui (Making good use of Weibo to monitor the society).' 30 March. <http://sc.people.com.cn/news/HTML/2012/3/20/20120320154549.htm> (accessed 29 May 2013)

352 Xinhua Net. 2011. 'Sichuan Huili xian xianfu zhaopian shijian bei pin zhengfu weiji gongguan chenggong yanben (Sichuan Huili county floating photo incident was considered as classic example of government crisis management).' 4 July. <http://www.people.com.cn/h/2011/0704/c25408-1949207565.html> (accessed 29 March 2013)

353 Xinhua Net. 2011. 'Sichuan Huili xian xianfu zhaopian shijian bei pin zhengfu weiji gongguan chenggong yanben (Sichuan Huili county floating photo incident was considered as classic example of government crisis management).' 4 July. <http://www.people.com.cn/h/2011/0704/c25408-1949207565.html> (accessed 29 March 2013)

354 Ibid.

apologised. Secondly, they published the original photos to illustrate how the doctored photo was made, as well as to clarify that, contrary to public belief, the officials did in fact visit the construction site. Thirdly, they did not delete the condemnation and criticism posted on its Weibo account. Instead, they reframed the public debate agenda towards tourism in a humorous way ('please take a look at those unphotoshopped pictures of beautiful Huili,' as posted on Weibo). The Public Opinion Monitoring Office of the *People's Daily* listed 'Huili floating photo incident' as the best government crisis management case in the second quarter of 2011, and recommended that its strategy be adopted by local party-state organs across the nation as a best practice.³⁵⁵

Besides causing public relation crises, rumours also have the potential to destabilise the party-state. The following two cases demonstrate how Weibo, if used properly, can help the government to refute rumours and rally support. On the morning of 11 June 2012, Wuhan, Hubei province, was covered by an unusual yellow haze. Rumours quickly emerged that it was caused by an explosion at a steel factory and/ or by a chlorine gas leak from a chemical factory.³⁵⁶ As the rumour caused panic among local citizens, the municipal Environment Protection Agency quickly acknowledged the existence of abnormal haze on its Weibo account, and announced that a joint investigation had been launched.³⁵⁷ The steel factory posted a message denying the explosion, and urged netizens to wait for the investigation to be completed, while the municipal Meteorological Bureau posted two posts explaining that the unusual haze was caused by extraordinary weather conditions.

By mid-day, the local police branch of Wuhan, where the chemical factory is located, announced that there had been no report of a gas leak. Thirty minutes later, Hubei provincial government announced that gossip concerning an explosion and gas leak was fictional. Within the next hour, the agencies kept sending updates on air pollution levels, the progress of the investigation, as well as tips teaching the public how to minimize health damages. With the help of a local celebrity (also a Sina Weibo user), the source of the rumour was found on the same afternoon. In the meantime, the government also invited a physician to answer queries from netizens on Weibo. In the pre-Weibo era, it would have taken hours for the official response to be heard via traditional media by the public. It could have been too late to prevent the further dissemination of the rumour, but not in a microblogging era.³⁵⁸ The case above is a good example of the promptness in response and coordination across five parties at various levels, from municipal to provincial, and from government office to state enterprise, all by making use of Weibo.

An additional example of refuting rumours via Weibo relates to an event which occurred in Zhaoqing, Guangdong province, where an explosion was reported. The online spokesperson for the police department arrived at the scene and posted three posts on their Weibo, *Ping'an Zhaoqing*. Within three minutes, event developments were updated.³⁵⁹ The first post confirmed that a man had been killed; the

355People's Daily Online. 2011. '2011nian dier jidu difang yingdui wangluo yuqing nengli tuijianbang (Internet public opinion management chart, second quarter of 2011).' 18 July. <http://society.people.com.cn/GB/223265/15181629.html> (accessed 30 March 2013)

356Sina Weibo. 2012. 'Wuhan liti yingdui wuli yuqing (Wuhan manages public opinion regarding haze).' 11 June. http://www.Weibo.com/houue?key_word=%E6%AD%A6%E6%B1%89%E7%AB%8B%E4%BD%93%E5%BA%94%E5%AF%B9%E9%9B%BE%E9%9C%BE%E8%88%86%E6%83%85&is_search=1 (accessed 15 March 2013)

357 □ibid.

358ibid.

359 □Sina Weibo. 2012. 'Meiti yishi: dai diannao mei? (Media awareness: making announcement via Weibo).' 9 March. http://www.Weibo.com/u/1912841570?key_word=%E5%AA%92%E4%BD%93%E6%84%8F%E8%AF%86%EF%BC%9A%E2%80%9C%E5%B8%A6%E7%94%B5%E8%84%91%E6%B2%A1%EF%BC%9F&is_search=1 (accessed 15 March 2013)

second post identified the man as an ex-convict, and suggested that he was killed while handling an explosive device on the street; the third post confirmed that an investigation of his motivations had been launched. There have been many bombing incidents across China in recent years, and the circumstances of these cases were usually unclear due to the reluctance of the party-state to release details, thus encouraging the spread of rumours. Addressing the rumours in a timely manner is now possible via social media and Weibo.

5.12. Government Weibo in Improving the State Image

Weibo accounts set up by individual officials can be influential among netizens, and if managed properly, may improve not only the image of the official, but also that of the state. Li Wenrong, mayor of Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province, was the first mayor of a provincial capital in China to set up an official Weibo account that was registered under his real name. During his tenure between 2013 and 2015, he posted 723 posts and attracted over 920,000 followers, which gained him the nickname 'Weibo mayor' in Chinese media.³⁶⁰ In May 2013, nearly one thousand Kunming residents gathered outside the Yunnan provincial government office, protesting against the building of an oil refinery facility in Kunming. Li spoke to the crowd and promised to set up a Weibo account in order to improve communication with the people.

He posted this first post the next day stating that '...I hope to build a bridge to communicate with you frankly. I am willing to hear your suggestions regarding the development of Kunming. Together with my colleagues, we will study your ideas and suggestions carefully.'³⁶¹ Li's account attracted more than ten thousand followers within an hour of its opening. He kept posting two to three posts every day in the days following the demonstration, and reduced the number to one post per day at the end of May. Every few days he would post an announcement detailing the actions taken in response to netizens' complaints on a variety of issues. Most of the topics concerned people's daily life, such as broken traffic light repairs, the garbage collection service, road tax overcharges, and noise pollution.

³⁶⁰Li Guo. 2015. 'Weibo shizhang li wenrong diaoren qujing (Weibo mayor Li Wenrong assigns to Qujing),' 23 October, 21st *Century Economic Herald*. <http://m.21jingji.com/article/20151023/herald/042b055616c5b3de1671c60222a9dcd6.html> (accessed 29 December 2015)

³⁶¹Kunming Shizhang. 17 May 2013. Weibo of Kunming mayor. http://www.Weibo.com/u/3258074703?is_hot=1 (accessed 18 December 2015)



Illustration 7: Screen shot of Kunming Mayor's Weibo post

What made Li's Weibo stand out was his tolerance of criticism addressed to himself and the municipal government, in addition to his apologetic tone, which is not common among Chinese officials. A stampede tragedy occurred in a primary school on 25 September 2014, which left six students dead and 32 injured. Three days later, Li posted the results of the investigation, which involved the dismissal of a handful of junior officials (see Figure 2 above). The post attracted intense debate among netizens, generating 72 reposts and 168 comments. However, instead of accepting the government's apology, comments left by netizens were overwhelmingly critical of the official response. One comment read 'as mayor, you should be the one responsible (for the incident). You only know how to make empty slogans on Weibo... you should have stepped down a long time ago.'³⁶² Another commenter stated 'Thanks to the efforts of the dear mayor, it's getting more difficult for students in Kunming to find a place in a school.'³⁶³ It is worth pointing out that personal criticism of the mayor was allowed to be published, and remained on his Weibo account, which shows that Li adopted an approach similar to politicians in a democratic society, where taking criticism from the public is the norm.

The Kunming town centre was flooded unexpectedly after heavy rain on a summer day in 2013, which prompted fierce criticism by netizens. Comments left on Li's Weibo page attributed the flooding to the lack of investment into the city's drainage system, and to neglect on the part of the municipal government. Li not only kept the critical messages on his Weibo account, but also acknowledged that the government did

362Kunming Shizhang. 1 October 2014. Weibo of Kunming mayor. http://www.Weibo.com/p/1005053258074703/album?from=page_100505&mod=TAB#place (accessed 18 December 2015)

363Kunming Shizhang. 30 September 2014. Weibo of Kunming mayor. http://www.Weibo.com/p/1005053258074703/album?from=page_100505&mod=TAB#place (accessed 18 December 2015)

not pay enough attention to the issue until it was too late to act effectively.³⁶⁴ In another incident, some of the primary schools in Kunming stopped providing lunch without consulting the parents. Many parents complained to the mayor via his Weibo, who apologised and took responsibility for the misunderstanding: 'we have caused inconvenience to the public due to our incompetence in the management and provision of services.'³⁶⁵ Following his intervention, school lunch services resumed.

Commenting on his approach, Li stated that 'I did not open this Weibo account for the sake of opening it, but to better understand the thoughts of the public via this channel.'³⁶⁶ He clarified that some of the posts were written by himself, while others were drafted by his team members. All posts were reviewed and edited by him before publication, prompting him to take full responsibility for the content on his account.³⁶⁷ The mayor of Kunming Weibo account was set up by Li, and when he left his position in late 2015, his successor promised that he would continue to communicate and interact with the public on Weibo.³⁶⁸

Another government official enjoying celebrity status on Weibo was Wu Hao, director of the Propaganda Department, Honghe, Yunnan, who opened a Weibo account using his real identity in November 2009. In terms of number of posts and followers, his Weibo was ranked as the most influential among government officials in 2011 by the *People's Daily*.³⁶⁹ By 9 June 2013, his Sina Weibo account had more than 1.8 million followers.³⁷⁰ He was open about his intention to transform government Weibo into a platform for the party and the state to engage directly with the people, as well as for the people to have their requests and voices heard directly by the party-state.³⁷¹

One third of his posts were interactions with netizens, including his views on government policies.³⁷² He acknowledged in a post that many of his counterparts established Internet teams to guide public opinion, while in Honghe, he set up an 'online criticism award' to encourage netizens to monitor the government, and to turn the (negative) impact of online public opinion into a force for better governance.³⁷³ Addressing doubts from one of his followers, he reiterated that the Honghe government did not employ Internet commenters, but an online spokesperson instead.³⁷⁴

364Kunming Shizhang. 22 July 2013. Weibo of Kunming mayor.

http://www.Weibo.com/u/3258074703?is_hot=1 (accessed 18 December 2015)

365Kunming Shizhang. 23 August 2013. Weibo of Kunming mayor. http://www.Weibo.com/u/3258074703?is_hot=1 (accessed 18 December 2015)

366Sina News. 2013. 'Kunming shizhang Weibo bairi (One hundred days of Kunming mayor's Weibo),' 26 August.

http://qcyn.sina.com.cn/news/ynyw/2013/0826/110637153833.html?qq-pf-to=pcqq_c2c (accessed 28 December 2015)

367Li Guo. 2015. 'Weibo shizhang li wenrong diaoren qujing (Weibo mayor Li Wenrong assigns to Qujing),' 23 October, 21st *Century Economic Herald*. <http://m.21jingji.com/article/20151023/herald/042b055616c5b3de1671c60222a9dcd6.html> (accessed 29 December 2015)

368Kunming Shizhang. 14 November 2015. Weibo of Kunming mayor. http://www.Weibo.com/u/3258074703?is_hot=1 (accessed 19 December 2015)

369People's Daily Public Opinion Monitoring Office. 2011. 'Annual report of government account on Sina Weibo 201,' December. Available at <http://yuqing.people.com.cn/GB/16575758.html> (accessed 4 June 2013)

370Wuhao Honghe Weiyu. Sina Weibo. http://www.Weibo.com/u/1662450871?topnav=1&wvr=5&topsug=1&is_ori=1 (accessed 9 June 2013)

371 Wuhao Honghe Weiyu. 2012-10-24 11:49. Sina Weibo.http://www.Weibo.com/1662450871/profile?from=profile&wvr=5&loc=tabprofile&is_ori=1&start_time=2012-06-01&end_time=2013-06-09&is_search=1&key_word=%E7%BA%A2%E6%B2%B3&is_text=1#_rnd1370743460572 (accessed 7 June 2013)

372People's Daily Public Opinion Monitoring Office. 2011. 'Annual report of government account on Sina Weibo 201.'

373Wuhao Honghe Weiyu. 2012-10-22 15:29. Sina Weibo.
http://www.Weibo.com/1662450871/profile?from=profile&wvr=5&loc=tabprofile&is_ori=1&start_time=2012-06-01&end_time=2013-06-09&is_search=1&key_word=%E7%BA%A2%E6%B2%B3&is_text=1#_rnd1370743460572 (accessed 7 June 2013)

374Wuhao Honghe Weiyu. 2012-10-24 01:10. Sina Weibo.
http://www.Weibo.com/1662450871/profile?from=profile&wvr=5&loc=tabprofile&is_ori=1&start_time=2012-06-01&end_time=2013-06-09&is_search=1&key_word=%E7%BA%A2%E6%B2%B3&is_text=1#_rnd1370743460572 (accessed 7 June 2013)

Wu conducted a poll via Weibo in January 2012, asking the residents of Honghe what kind of Chinese New Year celebrations they would like to see, and found that the most popular choice was a fireworks display. He then posted the dilemma of the Propaganda Department online: how to satisfy public demand for the celebration while keeping government spending at a minimum. His post received an enthusiastic response, with different solutions provided, such as commercial sponsorship.³⁷⁵ Coordinating via Weibo, a tobacco company based in Yunnan agreed to sponsor the fireworks, which resulted in a thirty-minute fireworks display on Chinese New Year's Eve. In this event, the win-win situation was a result of the encouragement offered to netizens to provide solutions to government conundrums.

Of Wu's posts, 19% provided information and news regarding Honghe.³⁷⁶ He reported that the party secretary of Honghe visited the website operated by Honghe Propaganda Department, and urged the managers of the site to make the voice of the party-state heard, and to enhance interaction between netizens.³⁷⁷ In his 2011 year end progress report, he posted that his department had helped to raise 400 million yuan for two of the poorest villages in Honghe.³⁷⁸ In another occasion, he posted a picture of himself holding a beef jerky with a caption saying that it was his working lunch. The gist of his ensuing message was that whilst many netizens thought that all party officials were having luxury banquets everyday, the majority of officials are actually as hard working and thrifty as him. His post received 87 comments, many of them negative, including some that challenged him to upload pictures of him having a banquet, and questioning his ownership of an expensive car and house. Although Wu did not respond to criticism, what is significant is that all those comments were tolerated and were not deleted from his Weibo.

The section above demonstrated that government Weibo can serve as a useful platform to promote *wangluo wenzheng* by providing services to the public, engaging netizens, and encouraging interaction between the state and society. Additionally, microblogging is a helpful tool for crisis management and to improve the state's image. Nevertheless, there are limitations to the effectiveness of government Weibo as I will detail in the following section.

5.13. Limitations of Government Weibo

Although Weibo has increasingly become an important platform for the state to engage and interact with the public, there is a lack of central planning and standardized procedures regarding how to set up and

375 Sina Weibo. 2012. 'Zixun minzhong youhua zhengwu juece guocheng (Optimizing decision-making process by consulting the public).' 12 January. http://www.Weibo.com/u/1912841570?key_word=%E2%80%9C%E4%B8%89%E9%97%AE%E2%80%9D%E5%B0%B1%E8%83%BD%E5%B0%BD%E5%96%84%E5%B0%BD%E7%BE%8E%E5%86%B3%E7%AD%96&is_search=1 (accessed 15 March 2013)

376 □ People's Daily Public Opinion Monitoring Office. 2011. 'Annual report of government account on Sina Weibo 201.'

377 □ Wuhao Honghe Weiyu 2013-04-25 08:47. Sina Weibo.

http://www.Weibo.com/1662450871/profile?from=profile&wvr=5&loc=tabprofile&is_ori=1&start_time=2012-06-01&end_time=2013-06-09&is_search=1&key_word=%E7%BA%A2%E6%B2%B3&is_text=1#_rnd1370743460572 (accessed 7 June 2013)

378 Wuhao Honghe Weiyu. 2011-12-22 09:39. Sina Weibo.

http://www.Weibo.com/1662450871/profile?from=profile&wvr=5&loc=tabprofile&is_ori=1&start_time=2012-06-01&end_time=2013-06-09&is_search=1&key_word=%E7%BA%A2%E6%B2%B3&is_text=1#_rnd1370743460572 (accessed 7 June 2013)

manage a government Weibo account. As there is no law or directive prescribing that all government offices must set up a Weibo account, it is up to individual officials or agencies to decide whether to open one or not. Tens of thousands of government departments and individual officials at different administrative levels have opened Weibo accounts regardless, and the CCP has yet to issue an official directive on this topic. The vice-president of the Central Party School acknowledges that many party officials have a very limited understanding of Weibo, and only a handful of government and party entities recognize the significance of this form of social media, or make good use of it (Dou and Li eds. 2011). It was not until 22 May 2012 that Sina Weibo published the first 'Government Weibo guideline' in China, with detailed instructions on how to manage the account, as well as on how to handle online public opinion. It also lists twelve things that the government should do or not while posting on Weibo. Since it was published by a commercial website, without political weight, the extent to which government officials follow the guidelines is not yet known

Whilst the party-state pay attention to the maintenance of a high standard and quality of government Weibo communications, officials at the local level do not always keep up with the standards. Many of the posts published on Beijing's 16 district and county government Weibo accounts contained information such as weather forecasts, lifestyle tips, health advice, and cooking recipes, which were irrelevant to government information. One member of staff admitted that the irrelevant posts are to meet daily quota: 'although the content of each post has to be reviewed and approved by our superior, it was not strict at all. Unless a major incident happens, we just post whatever we get. Once the target is met, our task is complete.'³⁷⁹ The success of a government Weibo account very much depends on the person who maintains it. Since the accounts are mostly run by low to medium ranking employees who work in shifts, a misjudgment by the duty person could cause serious consequences which might damage the reputation of the office concerned. Staff from Sina Weibo revealed that for some of the officials and government offices, opening a Weibo account is merely part of the requirements imposed by the higher party-state, while others consider Weibo accounts to be trendy, but with little impact on netizen engagement or e-governance (Shang 2011).

According to statistics compiled by the Online Public Opinion Monitoring Office of the *People's Daily*, 60% of government Weibo accounts publish fewer than 100 posts, and only 8% of government accounts more than 500 posts.³⁸⁰ In Sichuan province, 50.9% of government Weibo accounts failed to update information in a week, and 29.5% post fewer than ten posts a week.³⁸¹ I visited the Weibo page of the Government Information Office of Sanya, Hainan province, on 10 June 2013, and found that the latest post was on 30 January 2012.³⁸² The Police Department in Heilongjiang province opened 3,100 accounts on behalf of local police branches and officers within the province, and many of the individual ones had not been activated, which points to a reluctance in using Weibo at the lower levels of governance.³⁸³

379 Beijing Evening Post. 2013. 'Beijing 16 quxian zhengwu Weibo 6 cheng butan zheng, pianai tianqi, yangsheng (60% of the tweets in 16 districts and counties Weibo in Beijing didn't mention politics but weather and lifestyle)', 24 September. Republished by Xinhua News.

http://news.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2013-09/24/c_117489024.htm (accessed 22 December 2015)

380 People's Daily Online. 2012. 'Weililang gaibian zhengfeng (Force of Weibo changes the direction of political wind).' March 30.

<http://media.people.com.cn/GB/40728/15542784.html> (accessed 22 March 2013)

381 Aipusi Internet public opinion. 2012. 'Sichua yubanshu zhengwu Weibo lianxu qitian bu gengxin (More than half government Weibo in Sichuan failed to update in a week).' Sina Weibo. 3 May. <http://q.Weibo.com/203034/status/b8BnP6RMw?source=Weibosource> (accessed 22 March 2013)

382 Sanya Government Information Office. Sina Weibo <http://e.Weibo.com/u/2074376453> (accessed 10 June 2013)

383 People's Daily Online. 2012. 'Force of Weibo changes the direction of political wind.' March 30.

A study of 1,600 posts by 16 district government Weibo accounts in Beijing found that only 85 (5.3%) were directly related to the main concerns of the public, such as announcing new government policies, interacting with netizens, or addressing their complaints.³⁸⁴ 24% of the posts were about promotions of commercial activities and tourist attractions instead of government propaganda materials. Although posts about local governments' activities accounted for 39% of the total in the area, many of the events took place 'a few days ago' or 'recently' when first posted. It demonstrates that the staff managing Weibo accounts fail to take advantage of Weibo as a real-time platform to provide up-to-date information. In the meantime, 13% of the posts concerned lifestyle and health, which are irrelevant to the official function of government Weibo.³⁸⁵ Haidian district, for example, shared a post providing recipes of prawn spaghetti and another one advising readers not to use foaming face wash during autumn. One post on the Changping district government Weibo reminded readers to avoid eating six kinds of food when they are hungry. Although this is useful information for the wellbeing of the general public, the main purpose of government Weibo is to release official information. According to a survey conducted by the China Youth Daily, 97% of netizens complained that part of government Weibo activity does not directly address public issues.³⁸⁶ The presence of irrelevant content on government Weibo can be counterproductive as it is liable to undermine the authority of the state. However, given the large number of government Weibo accounts and the absence of nationwide standards in regards to their use, it is inevitable that the quality of each account will vary.

5.14. Conclusion

As a popular social media platform in China, Weibo has increasingly become an important source of news of social discontent, with some of the scandals exposed by Weibo users resulting in the dismissal of government officials. However, Weibo also offers an interactive platform for the state to engage with the public as Chinese leaders recognise its potential in promoting e-governance. Setting up government Weibo account reached new momentum in local jurisdictions, with new accounts set up every day.³⁸⁷ Using both 'carrots' and 'sticks' best describes the authorities' approach towards Weibo. On the one hand, they actively promote government Weibo, while on the other hand, they tightened up control, exemplified through events such as the crackdown of Big Vs in 2015. This tactic shows the authoritarian regime's resilience—quickly adapting to the new media environment and also turning it to its advantage.

The case studies referred in this chapter demonstrate that the party-state can gain from the promotion of government Weibo if managed properly and skillfully. The advocacy of *wangluo wenzheng*, and subsequently of *Weibo wenzheng*, demonstrates that the CCP goes beyond propaganda by using Weibo

384 Beijing Evening Post. 2013. 'Beijing 16 quxian zhengwu Weibo 6 cheng butan zheng, pianai tianqi, yangsheng (60% of the tweets in 16 districts and counties Weibo in Beijing didn't mention politics but weather and lifestyle),' 24 September. Republished by Xinhua News.

http://news.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2013-09/24/c_117489024.htm (accessed 22 December 2015)

385 ibid.

386 China Youth Daily. 2014. '96.5% shoufangzhe renwen youxie zhengwu weibo meineng zhimian wenti (96.5% believe some of the government weibo fail to address issues directly),' 1 May.

http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2014-05/01/nw.D110000zgqnb_20140501_1-03.htm (accessed 19 February 2016)

387 Sina Weibo. 2013. 'Report on Government Weibo on Sina'.

<http://vdisk.Weibo.com> (accessed 20 May 2013)

as a tool for public opinion guidance. It also shows a human side of party officials, and the ability of e-government to provide better governance. The party and government departments across China use Weibo to serve the people by providing information, engaging and interacting with the public, solving public relation crises, handling negative news, and refuting rumours.

The management of the effects of unexpected rainstorm in Beijing illustrates how the government could provide services to residents, and the significance of cooperation between the state and netizens through Weibo. The director of the Ministry of Public Security's Anti-Abduction Office, Chen Shiqu, made good use of Weibo as a platform for netizens and government to coordinate and cooperate in the fight against child abduction. The 'photoshopped incident' in Huili demonstrates how Weibo can be used to solve public relations crises. Officials in Huili county, Sichuan province, turned an embarrassing scandal into a tourism marketing opportunity to promote this remote county. The cases of Li Wenrong, mayor of Kunming, and Wu Hao, director of the Propaganda Department in Honghe, Yunnan province, suggest that Weibo accounts set up by individual officials can be influential and, if managed properly, improve the state's image.

When rumours of a chemical leak emerged in Wuhan city, a well-coordinated and prompt response mobilized five government offices via their Weibo accounts, which acted to prevent further rumours. The fast response of the Party Secretary of Shanghai, via the government's Weibo account, to the grievances raised by the father of a terminally ill cancer patient served as an opportunity to improve relationships between party officials and the public. By having the courage to openly apologise for misbehaviour, Yuzhou police in Henan province managed to improve the image of their department. The party-state in Yinchuan City coordinated via their Weibo accounts and helped to secure payment for migrant workers, showing how the government can serve the public's interests. The popularity of government Weibo, and the officials making good use of Weibo to mobilize public support and improve the party-state image, in essence promote a new method of propaganda strategy. In this sense, Weibo adds a new dimension to the CCP's innovative Internet policy.

An intriguing observation emerging from my research is that, although President Xi keeps asking officials and government departments to make good use of social media, he himself does not have an official Weibo or Wechat account. After posting his first Weibo post in December 2015 when visiting the *People's Liberation Army Daily*, state media never again reported any other participation on the platform by the President. Two years prior to Xi's first post, a Weibo account claimed to be run by Xi's supporters was closed without explanation. There could be two possible reasons. The first is that the authorities might have found it too difficult to cope with the overwhelming scale of responses from netizens. Xi's Weibo post attracted more than 48,000 comments within a day, many of them asking sensitive questions about topics such as air pollution.³⁸⁸ The second explanation is the secretive nature of communications surrounding top CCP leaders, according to which their personal lives are considered taboo. In fact, none of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee members own an official Weibo account.

388Huang, Zheping. 2015. 'Chinese president Xi Jinping blogged for the first time—and 48,000 people commented,' Quartz. 28 December <https://qz.com/582179/chinese-president-xi-jinping-blogged-for-the-first-time-and-48000-people-commented/>

Although we have seen successful cases of government microblog use, there is a lack of central planning and standardised procedures regarding the proper set up and management of government Weibo accounts across the country. The quality standards of government microblogs vary greatly. My findings echo Renz and Sullivan's (2013) study on Russian regional governors' use of Twitter. Given that regional officials in both China and Russia were not popularly elected, why do they bother to engage citizens via social media? The authors suggest that the main motivation came in response to the then-President Medvedev's explicit request to officials to increase their online presence. The study also finds that Russian governors use Twitter as an additional tool to publicise and to self-promote state activities. A similar phenomenon can also be observed on China's government Weibo accounts. The real motivation for their existence is the gain of personal fame or influence, instead of the interaction with the public.

Having said this, the role of Weibo becomes more and more important and visible in mobilising public support, guiding public opinion in the government's favour, and in improving the CCP's legitimacy. Compared with other propaganda strategies studied in this thesis, Weibo is the most interactive platform whose success relies on the participation of the netizens. As WeChat is gaining popularity, the significance of Weibo as the main social-media platform has declined in recent years. Nevertheless, the number of active monthly users on Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo have still been increasing day by day. Government Weibo therefore has the potential to provide e-services to the public, engage netizens directly, and interact with the public more effectively. The research findings in this chapter serve as a snapshot recording the interactions between the state and public at one point in time. Besides imposing censorship on Weibo, the party-state has proven that it importantly make good use of this social media. This suggests that the CCP's propaganda strategy has moved beyond the traditional methods of censorship and control, towards e-governance or *wangluo wenzhang*.

6. Chapter Six: Government Online Message Boards

6.1. Introduction

Institutional adaptability and responsiveness is the key to the authoritarian resilience discourse. The implementation of tactical adaptations in response to an increasingly demanding public is one of the factors contributing to the party-state's longevity in power (Gilley 2003 and Pei 2014). As we have seen in previous chapters, the Chinese party-state's approach to the cyberspace is not only about censorship, filtering, and blocking information. The CCP also actively uses the Internet as a new medium to disseminate information, and to engage and interact with the public directly in order to guide public opinion, mobilise public support, and enhance legitimacy. The party-state has been advocating e-governance (*wangluo wenzheng*) since the summer of 2008. *e-governance* encourages the public to use the Internet as a platform to communicate with the state, through which ordinary people can express their opinions, make suggestions, and file complaints. In the meantime, *e-governance* allows the state to better understand public opinion and to respond to citizens' needs.

As one of the goals of e-governance is to promote interaction between netizens and officials, government Weibo, e-government, and online message boards could all serve this purpose. Nonetheless, government message boards play a slightly different role compared with Weibo and e-government. Although Chinese central and provincial government portals do provide certain interactive services, such as mail box and live chat, these are not their main features. With regards to Weibo, two of the main Weibo services chosen by the party-state to open official accounts are operated by commercial companies—Sina and Tencent. Although Weibo is an effective platform to facilitate interaction, the Chinese government does not own Weibo. Only government message boards hosted by state media or the central government portal are, entirely dedicated to the interaction between the state and netizens.

In fact, the Chinese government is not the only one promoting online message boards. In 2013, Texas became the first state in the United States to allow its state officials to use an online message board maintained by the governing body to communicate with colleagues between official meetings. This online forum is also accessible to the public. Nevertheless, this is not a common policy practice in the US. In China, government online message boards reach far more citizens. The CCP has set up five online message boards with different themes since 2006 for the netizens to interact with senior officials, from ministers to provincial party secretaries, and with different departments in the CCP and government. It is a more interactive approach to engaging the public compared with Internet commentators and e-government initiatives.

Four of these message boards were hosted by the online version of the CCP Central Committee's official newspaper, the *People's Daily Online*. The first one was called 'Message Board for Local Leaders' (*Difang Lingdao Liuyanban*) and was dedicated to party chiefs and heads of government at provincial, municipal and county levels. The second one was dedicated to the head of each ministry of the State

Council and was called 'Message Board for Ministers' (*Buwei Lingdao Liuyanban*). The third one was called 'Direct Line to Zhongnanhai' (*Zhitong Zhongnanhai*), which allowed netizens to engage with top party leaders, such as the CCP's General Secretary. The fourth one, called 'Mass Line Message Board' (*Qunzhong Luxian Liuyanban*), was set up to allow the public to make suggestions and to comment on the party's workings during the 'mass line' campaign. As of January 2015, however, only the Message Board for Local Leaders and the Mass Line Message Board remain active, while the other two have been removed from the *People's Daily* website. There is no mention of the latter two message boards in the 'About Us' section on either English or Chinese version of the *People's Daily Online*.³⁸⁹ The fifth message board, called 'I have a word for the Premier' (*Wo Xiang Zongli Shuo Juhua*, also known as Message Board for the Premier), is operated by the State Council, and is the only message board hosted by the Chinese central government instead of the party newspaper.

Each of the message boards was set up for different reasons and via multiple backgrounds. Some of them entered the public domain silently, while a few of them disappeared quietly. It is worth to look at how these message boards evolved. This chapter begins with an examination of how government online message boards serve the purpose of *wangluo wenzheng*. It follows with a literature review of the relationship between public interaction with the government and public participation. I will then look at the development of each of these five message boards and examine the differences between them. The second half of this chapter comprises examples selected from all message boards in order to find out if they serve the following functions: a) act as feedback mechanism; b) provide a platform to express public opinion; c) strengthen external scrutiny of the state; d) improve state-society relationships and thus, enhance the state's image. I argue that government online message boards provide another channel for public participation, encourage more interaction between the state and society, and therefore may increase the public's trust in the government and enhance its accountability. The party-state does not only use message boards as a tool for propaganda, but they promote better governance.

6.2. Methodology

The main research methods employed in this chapter are qualitative through data collection, content analysis, web content analysis, document analysis, and participant observation. Content analysis is a widely used research method in the examination of communication content (Berelson 1952). Meanwhile, content analysis can also be employed in studies of human-computer interaction such as web-based applications, norms of behaviour and cultural values (Okazaki and Rivas 2002, Singh and Baack 2004). Web content analysis is an adaptation of content analysis techniques that have been used to study political campaign advertising on television and Internet radio.³⁹⁰ Applying content analysis to Web-based content provides a rich opportunity to study netizens' styles, patterns or preferences that does not necessitate researcher intervention (Kim and Kuljis 2010: 374).

389See *People's Daily Online* (Chinese). 'Renmin wang jianjie (A brief history of the People's Daily Online)'. Last updated on 16 January 2015. <http://www.people.com.cn/n/2012/1219/c353481-19942680.html> (accessed 26 January 2015) and *People's Daily Online* (English). 'About Us'. Last updated 24 November 2014. <http://en.people.cn/102840/8347294.html> (accessed 26 January 2015)

390See Gibson, Rachel K. and Stephen Ward. 2000. A Proposed Methodology for Studying the Function and Effectiveness of Party and Candidate Websites. *Social Science Computer Review* 18 (3): 301-319.

I visited all five government online message boards and browsed messages posted by the public, as well as the government's responses. I selected examples that demonstrate that message boards can: 1) act as feedback mechanism; 2) provide a platform to express opinions; 3) act as a tool for external scrutiny; and 4) improve state-society relationships. Two of the message boards studied in this chapter, Message Board for Ministers and Direct Line to Zhongnanhai, have ceased to function. For the study of the history and origin of these two message boards, I used a digital archive service called 'Wayback Machine,' which allows archives of the World Wide Web to be searched and accessed. By inserting websites of the Message Board for Ministers and the Direct Line to Zhongnanhai into the search page of Wayback Machine, I was able to visit the archived pages and conduct research.

6.3. Message Boards in Relation to e-governance

In 2008, a new term '*wangluo wenzheng*' started to emerge across Chinese media. As I have mentioned in the first chapter, this term comprises the functions of e-consultancy, e-participation, and e-services. Therefore, it can be translated as e-governance. The People's Daily defines *wangluo wenzheng* as 'the government utilising the Internet as a tool for propaganda as well as for understanding public opinion, collecting ideas and wisdom from the public.'³⁹¹ Guangdong provincial government believes that *wangluo wenzheng* means 'using the Internet as a platform to collect opinion and wisdom from the grassroots, and to disseminate useful information, including political democracy.'³⁹² An op-ed piece on the CCP news online suggests that *wangluo wenzheng* can be seen as 'knowing what the public want and think via the Internet.'³⁹³

Hu Jintao, then president of China, paid a visit to the headquarters of the People's Daily Online in June 2008 and interacted with netizens via Qiangguo Forum. During the visit, he emphasised the importance of listening to the people's opinion before making decisions.³⁹⁴ Hu's visit was considered by many Chinese scholars and media as the beginning of e-governance, which led the way in advocating the use of Internet technology to foster better interaction and communication between the state and society.³⁹⁵ Functions of e-governance (*wangluo wenzheng*) include recording netizens' requests and publishing what actions have been taken accordingly, as well as seeking their opinion on major policies, and dissolving social discontent (Chen and Fan 2013).

The Chinese party-state acknowledges that social media, Weibo and Wechat in particular, have increasingly become the major platforms for exposing public incidents, therefore rendering traditional

391Diyi zhenglun wang. 'wangluo wenzheng xia de zhengfu juese (The role of the government in the context of wangluo wenzheng)' <http://5icoment.com/zhuanti?id=104> (accessed 13 October 2015)

392Wangluo wenzheng platform. 'What is wangluo wenzheng' <http://wen.oeeee.com/gov/> (accessed 10 October 2015)

393CCP News. 2011. 'Dui wangluo wenzheng gainian ji qi tezheng de zai renshi (Recognition of the concept and characteristics of wangluo wenzheng),' 18 October. <http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/40537/15936063.html> (accessed 10 October 2015)

394People's Daily Online. 2008. 'Hu jintao zongshuji touguo reminwang qiangguo luntan tong wangyou zaixian jiaoliu (General secretary Hu Jintao communicates with netizens via qiangguo forum),' 20 June. <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/7406621.html> (accessed 13 October 2015)

395See for example Wang Yang. 2014. 'Wangluo wenzheng de chuanbo texing ji xianshi kunjing (Characteristics and limitations of Wangluo wenzheng). People's Daily Online. 2 September. <http://media.people.com.cn/n/2014/0902/c388686-25589433.html> (accessed 10 October 2015); Chen and Fan (2013); Diyi zhenglun wang. 'wangluo wenzheng xia de zhengfu juese (The role of the government in the context of wangluo wenzheng)' <http://5icoment.com/zhuanti?id=104> (accessed 13 October 2015).

methods of public opinion guidance ineffective.³⁹⁶ In order to strengthen the capability of public opinion guidance, the State Council Information Office urges practitioners to 'proactively and progressively' utilise e-government, including government websites, message boards, government Weibo and Wechat accounts, as well as Internet commentators to disseminate information and communicate with netizens.³⁹⁷ In a nationwide survey conducted by the People's Daily regarding the public's attitude towards *wangluo wenzheng*, 69% of netizens declared that it is an effective way for the party and for government officials to understand public opinion. Answering posts left by netizens on message boards and forums is also seen as the most welcomed form of *wangluo wenzheng*.³⁹⁸

Commenting on the launch of Message Board for the Premier, the CCP News Online argued that through the institutionalisation of interaction between the government and netizens and by formalising the collection of suggestions from the public, a new means of conducting *wangluo wenzheng* is established.³⁹⁹ The director of the Public Opinion Monitoring Office at the *People's Daily Online*, Zhu Xinhua, believes that government message boards provide a direct channel between netizens and government, ensuring that the voice of the people can be heard and demand from the grassroots can be met, subsequently easing tensions in society.⁴⁰⁰ Zhu Xinhua also points out that message boards cultivate in netizens a habit of participation by making constructive suggestions to the government.⁴⁰¹ The Sichuan provincial government urges its officials to consider handling messages left by netizens on Message Board for Local Leaders as an opportunity to foster a closer relationship with the public as well as a means to propagate government policy.⁴⁰²

A national symposium on handling netizens' messages has been held annually since 2009, where representatives from departments in charge of official responses on online forums at the provincial, municipal and county level attend and exchange experiences.⁴⁰³ The 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China held in 2012 set out to build a service-oriented government with the help of Internet technology, including message boards.⁴⁰⁴ That same year, the national conference on handling netizens' messages was held in Beijing a month after the closing of the 18th National Congress of the

396State Council Information Office. 2014. 'Wangluo yulun gaibian meiti chuanbo geju (Internet public opinion changes media environment).' 24 March. <http://www.scio.gov.cn/zhzc/9/5/1/2014/30079/Document/1367226/1367226.htm> (accessed 8 August 2014)

397Ibid.

398People's Daily Online. 2009. 'Renminwang wangluo wenzheng diaocha xianshi 7cheng wangyou renke wangluo jiandu (People's Daily survey on wangluo wenzheng suggests that 70% of netizens welcome monitoring the government via the Internet),' 7 July. <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1026/9603337.html> (accessed 18 September 2015)

399CCP News. 2014. 'Zongli liuyanban yinlin wangluo wenzheng xin changtai (Message Board for the Premier leads a new way for wangluo wenzheng),' 2 September. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/pinglun/n/2014/0902/c241220-25589671.html> (accessed 20 September 2015)

400Southern Media. 2014. 'Zhu Xinhua: liangge yulunchang de rongtong zhidao (Zhu Xinhua: connecting two public opinion fields).' Nanfang Chuanmei Yanjiu (38). 25 July. http://www.nfmedia.com/cmzj/cmzj/jdzt/201212/t20121204_358647.htm (accessed 26 July 2014)

401Ibid.

402*People's Daily Online*. 2015. 'Gedi lingdao zhongshi wangmin husheng (Local leaders listen to the netizens),' 12 January. <http://leaders.people.com.cn/n/2015/0112/index.html>

403*People's Daily Online*. 2012. '2012 quanguo wangmin liuyan banli gongzuo zuotanhui zai jing zhaokai (2012 national symposium on handling netizens' message held in Beijing),' 27 December. <http://leaders.people.com.cn/GB/178291/218130/353499/index.html> (accessed 15 July 2014)

404State Council Information Office. 2013. 'Wang Cheng: quanmian guanche shibada jingsheng (Wang Cheng: implementing the spirit of the 18th National Congress),' 6 January. <http://www.scio.gov.cn/zxbd/tt/Document/1265493/1265493.htm> (accessed 14 December 2014)

CCP.⁴⁰⁵ During this meeting, several local offices received awards for their outstanding performance in responding to netizens' messages.

As we have seen in the previous chapter on e-government, the construction of government websites is guided at the strategic level by initiatives such as the Tenth Five-Year Plan for National Economy and Social Development (2001–2005)⁴⁰⁶ and 'Document Number 17' issued by the National Informatisation Leading Group in 2002.⁴⁰⁷ However, the use of message boards is not the result of grand planning at the central level, but a response to the development of a new environment in the Internet age. Government message boards have become an important part of e-governance. Nonetheless, we should note that this national level of coordination only concerns the Message Board for Local Leaders, operated by the People's Daily Online. Other government message boards have not yet reached the same scale as the Message Board for Local Leaders. The vast majority of academic studies on government online messages boards conducted by Chinese scholars in China are on this instead of other message boards.

6.4. Literature Review

Interactive features on government websites foster the connection between citizens and government and bring ordinary people closer to their rulers regardless of political system (West 2007: 8). Tools such as message boards, among others, provide participation opportunities for both citizens and officials to engage with each other (Justice *et. al.* 2006). e-governance (*wangluo wenzheng*), either through e-government, social media or message boards, is a way to reach out to the public by using the Internet as a platform. Recent studies investigated how e-government can serve as a tool to promote citizen participation by facilitating greater interaction between state and society (Anthopoulos *et al* 2007; Bertot *et al* 2008; Carter 2005; Chadwick and May 2003; Goldfinch *et al* 2009; Justice *et al* 2006; Reddick 2005; Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia 2012; West 2004; West 2007).

Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia (2012) suggest that information and communications technology (ICT) may foster improved links between citizens and government. Their assessment of local government portals in Mexico, however, found that the majority of the municipalities have not incorporated interaction tools, participation mechanisms, or collaboration applications. Instead, portals merely serve as a platform to disseminate government information. Reddick's (2005) study of citizen interaction with e-government focuses on the demand side instead of the supply side. The author found that the Internet enhances netizens' interaction with the government as most people prefer to engage the state via e-government instead of in person or via telephone.

405People's Daily Online. 2012. '2012 quanguo wangmin liuyan banli gongzuo zuotanhui zai jing zhaokai (2012 national symposium on handling netizens' message held in Beijing).' 27 December. <http://leaders.people.com.cn/GB/178291/218130/353499/index.html> (accessed 15 July 2014)

406General Office of the People's Government of Beijing Municipality. 2001. 'Quanguo zhengfu xitong xinxihua jianshe 2001-2005 nian guihua gangyao (Guideline for the construction of China's national e-government and informatisation)'. 30 May. <http://govfile.beijing.gov.cn/Govfile/ShowNewPageServlet?id=4376> (accessed 19 December 2014).

407People's Daily Online. 2014. 'Zhongguo dianzi zhengwu fazhan baogao 2014 (China e-government development report 2014)'. 24 November. <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2014/1124/c1001-26084417.html> (accessed 24 November 2014)

Welch *et. al.* (2005) examine the correlation between Internet users' satisfaction with e-government, their experience with government websites, and trust in the U.S. government. Their findings suggest that American citizens are generally satisfied with the implementation of e-government and this satisfaction contributes to their trust in the state. The authors conclude that e-government strategies, such as transparency and interactivity, play a key role in shaping e-government satisfaction. Applying two-stage models to analyze recent Pew survey data, Tolbert and Mossberger (2006) found that netizens' visits of local US government websites have the potential to increase trust in local governments, while federal government websites appeared to have the greatest positive effect on citizen attitudes towards government processes. They suggest that more frequent use of e-government leads to a more positive attitude towards the state, and that an increase in government trust is achieved by improved interactions through e-government.

West (2004) tries to analyse the implications of information technology on government service delivery and the public's perception towards the state by examining the content of U.S. state and federal government websites to see if interactive features improve service delivery, democratic responsiveness, and public outreach. He studied the key features of federal and state government websites that would promote connections and interaction between government and netizens, such as e-mail, chatrooms, message boards, and search engines. He found that the majority of the government websites do not fully utilise these features. Although e-government has the potential to improve democratic responsiveness and strengthen the public's perception of government efficiency, it has so far failed to fully use its capability to transform service delivery and to increase public trust in the government.

Justice *et. al.* (2006) notice that fiscal transparency and citizen participation contribute to democratic accountability and responsiveness in the distribution of public funds. Meanwhile, e-government is considered by some practitioners to have the potential to enhance democratic governance. Justice *et. al.* (2006) combined these two streams of public administration theory and practice, and came up with a set of criteria to assess the correlation between enhancing the use of e-government by the American state and local government, and the improvement of fiscal accountability and responsiveness. Some of the criteria that the authors employed to evaluate e-government performance are the public's participation opportunities and the representativeness of participating citizens. They found that although the Government Finance Officers Association emphasises the importance of Internet use to facilitate democratic processes, such as by allowing the public to participate in resource-allocation decisions, local government offices do not necessarily endorse the same idea. The authors conclude that many jurisdictions failed to fully exploit the potential of e-government to enhance fiscal accountability.

Current scholarship on e-government and public participation is mostly set in the context of a democratic system. Nevertheless, China, an authoritarian state, is also covered in literature published in English (Chen *et al* 2006; Jiang and Xu 2009; Lollar 2006) and by Chinese scholars in China (Duan 2010; Fang and Wang 2007; Huang 2008; Lv 2014; Yan 2013; Zhang 2009; Zhang and Huang 2008; Zou 2012). Zhang (2009) examines the level of interaction on five local government portals across China, from the wealthy Pudong, Shanghai in the East, to the less developed city of Xining in the West. The author found that although all portals offer some sort of interactive service, only two of them respond to netizens in a

timely manner. In the meantime, the channels available for public participation on the same websites are limited to mail box and telephone contacts.

Reviewing the development of public participation in China, Yan (2013: 254) points out that although Chinese netizens want to see better interaction with the state, the latter have not done enough to meet public demand and improve responsiveness. Zou (2012: 60) also observes a lack of public participation and interaction on government websites. Among those who visit government websites, only 18.3% participate in online discussions. The author proposes several reasons for this, which include: a) the poor design of interactive features, which makes it difficult for the public to leave a message; b) the slow response from the officials reduces the public's enthusiasm.

Duan (2010) uses the Message Board for Local Leaders set up by the *People's Daily Online* as a case study to understand online public opinion expression and government responsiveness. She found that 70% of the messages posted by netizens concern social issues that are closely related to their daily life. Although the average time for government officials to respond to netizens' inquiries has been shortened, the public are dissatisfied with their interactive experience on e-government websites. Based on the study of nearly 1,000 messages from 10 provinces on the Message Board for Local Leaders, Lv (2014) wants to find out if geographic location, economic development, and the education level of netizens affect their participation and in what way. Netizens in Beijing and Guangdong have the highest participation rate, which Lv attributes to the rich political culture and high education level of the population. However, the author did not find any correlation between the economic development of the regions and netizens' willingness to participate.

While the literature above mostly focuses on citizen participation via government websites, this chapter further expands the scope of the topic to study how government message boards act as a means of e-governance by allowing ordinary citizens to express opinions, make suggestions, and scrutinise the government. I focus on the supply side of the equation, or the government, and their take on the matter, instead of the demand side, or the public. This includes an analysis of how the party-state uses government boards as a feedback mechanism to make itself more accountable. In the following sections, I will give a detailed account of each [] and examine how official websites serve as a platform to facilitate more interaction between the state and society, and to promote e-participation.

6.5. Message Board for Local Leaders

In 2006, the *People's Daily Online* introduced a new feature called 'Message Board for Local Leaders' (*Difang Lingdao Liuyanban*), which serves as an online message board for netizens to engage with party chiefs and heads of government at provincial, municipal and county levels. It is the only nationwide interactive Internet platform dedicated to provincial and municipal officials and citizens.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁸Leaders, *People's Daily Online*. <http://leaders.people.com.cn/> (accessed 15 May 2014)

The launch of the Message Board for Local Leaders (hereafter MBLL) was inspired by the local leaders' database on the *People's Daily Online* where profiles of each party chief and head of government at provincial, municipal and county level were published. Next to each individual profile there was a 'leave a message' box.⁴⁰⁹ Since 2005, increasing numbers of netizens started to write to party and government officials through this channel.⁴¹⁰ Accordingly, the *People's Daily Online* began to categorize messages based on regions and departments in order to explore a new way for the state to interact with society. In the early days of the MBLL there were a dozen messages left by netizens, all without a single official response.⁴¹¹ A year after its launch, twenty-two party secretaries of the provincial CCP committee and provincial governors had replied to netizens.⁴¹²

A major boost to the popularity of public engagement via the Internet came on 20 June 2008, which marked the 60th founding anniversary of the *People's Daily*. For the occasion, Hu Jintao, General Secretary of the CCP, chatted with netizens on the *Qiangguo* (Strong Nation) Forum, one of the platforms comprising the People's Daily Online. It was the first time that China's top leader communicated directly with Chinese netizens, a highlight of the party-state's efforts to directly engage the people.⁴¹³ Only one month after Hu's visit, a new edition of the MBLL was launched, linking netizens with over 1,000 top leaders in 31 provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities directly under the central government, as well as Hong Kong and Macao, both of which enjoy the status of Special Administrative Region according to the One Country, Two Systems arrangement.

In order to increase its efficiency, the MBLL underwent another major makeover in 2010. The message system was optimized, thus making it more convenient for netizens to leave messages. Officials at the municipal level were granted the right to post comments directly on the message board instead of waiting for the approval of the staff from the *People's Daily Online*.⁴¹⁴ (See below)

During March 2011's 'two sessions' in Beijing,⁴¹⁵ the MBLL introduced a special web section for netizens to post their requests to provincial party secretaries and governors in the run up to the 'two sessions.' This special section received over ten thousand messages, some of which were published on a huge screen set up by the *People's Daily Online* in the Great Hall of the People.⁴¹⁶ Making a 'two sessions' special section available on the MBLL has become the norm since then.

409Wang, Xue and Wang Weibo. 2011. 'Zhitong Zhongnanhai de Taiqian Muhou (Behind the scene of Direct Line to Zhongnanhai). *People's Daily Online*. September 20. <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/192301/192373/192375/15709274.html> (accessed 25 January 2015)

410Sohu News. 2010. 'Guanmei tan zhitong zhongnanhai liuyanban jianli guocheng' (State media explains the launching of Direct Links to Zhongnanhai). September 15 <http://news.sohu.com/20100915/n274941639.shtml> (accessed 25 January 2015)

411Wang, Xue and Wang Weibo. 2011.

412People's Daily Online. 2009. 'Web changes China's political environment' <http://en.people.cn/90002/97371/> (accessed 25 January 2015)

413Xinhua News. 2008. 'Chinese president promises divergent voices be heard online'. June 20. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-06/20/content_8408597.htm (accessed 5 January 2015)

414*People's Daily*, 2010, 'Renminwang difang lingdao liuyanban si sui le (Four years anniversary of People's Daily Online local leaders message board), <http://leaders.people.com.cn/GB/70158/200464/> (accessed 10 January 2015)

415'Two Sessions' refer to the annual meetings of China's national advisory body and legislature, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and the National People's Congress respectively.

416Baidu. 'Difang lingdao liuyanban (Message Board for Local Leaders)'. <http://baike.baidu.com/view/4321860.htm> (accessed 10 January 2014)



Illustration 8: Screen shot of Message Board for Local Leaders

Besides traditional channels such as desktop or laptop computers, the MBLL is also available on other media platforms such as Weibo, WeChat, and mobile phone apps for OS and Android systems. Netizens are able to leave comments, file complaints or make inquiries on officials' message boards. Messages posted online are mostly related to daily life and civic concerns, such as environmental protection, land disputes, employment issues etc. The website received between 1,300 and 1,500 new messages daily in 2010.⁴¹⁷ In the first 11 months of 2013, it helped to solve 70,000 issues raised by netizens, 43% up compared with the previous year.⁴¹⁸ Surveys over a period of three to four years at the provincial level suggest that provinces that respond better to netizens' concerns posted on the message boards saw a decrease in the number of petitions made to the Bureau for Letters and Visits (*xinfang ju*).⁴¹⁹

Prior to the Internet age, the most common ways for the public to have their grievances heard by officials were either physically by visiting the Bureau for Letters and Visits office, or by sending letters. Message boards serve as a novel platform for online petition, which allows citizens to file their complaints from the comfort of their homes, via the Internet. The official I interviewed from the Bureau for Letters and Visits of Beijing Municipal Government acknowledged that 'e-channels' may reduce their workload as citizens have the opportunity to contact the relevant government office or officials directly online.⁴²⁰

417 *People's Daily*, 2010, 'Renminwang difang lingdao liuyanban si sui le (Four years anniversary of People's Daily Online local leaders message board)', <http://leaders.people.com.cn/GB/70158/200464/> (accessed 5 January 2015)

418 *People's Daily*, 2013, 'Luo Hua: 51 wei shengweishuji shengzhang zai renminwang difang lingdao liuyanban duihua wangmin (Luo Hua: 51 party chiefs and governors interact with netizens via leaders message boards).' 28 November. <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2013/1128/c1001-23683337.html> (accessed 5 January 2015)

419 *Ibid.*

420 Interview with official A, Bureau for Letters and Visits of Beijing Municipal Government, Beijing, 20 August 2015.

6.6. Message Board for Ministers

Given the popularity of the MBLL, the *People's Daily Online* launched another similar service in 2009, called 'Message Board for Ministers' (*Buwei Lingdao Liuyanban*), which was dedicated to the heads of ministries of the State Council. The design of this website resembles the MBLL, where replies from the government and selected messages from netizens are published on the front page. Further down the page are message boxes addressed to heads of ministries, agencies, commissions, state offices, and bureaus under the State Council, the main section where users can click and post their messages. In total, 81 departments were listed on the message board, ranging from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the State Council Research Office, to the People's Bank and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, covering almost all central government bodies.⁴²¹

Compared with the high publicity of the MBLL, which was widely reported in the state media, the Message Board for Ministers received less attention from the press. A search of the keywords 'MBLL' in Chinese on the search engine Baidu found 4.5 million results and 1.8 million results on Google. At the same time, 'Message Board for Ministers' only led to 1.25 million results on Baidu and 0.2 million results on Google.

Nonetheless, this message board enabling communication with State Council departments appeared to be popular among Internet users. As of February 2010, roughly a year after its introduction, it received over two hundred thousand messages, with the top three recipients being the Ministry of Education (62,750 messages), the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (31,531 messages) and the Ministry of Public Security (23,491 messages).⁴²² 33 departments, from the Ministry of Environmental Protection to the State Administration of Foreign Exchange, responded to netizens' inquiries. Among the most active ones, the Ministry of Public Security was responding to public questions posted on its message board since May 2009. Once a month, they responded to a set of selected messages, ranging from household registration issues, to driving license and stolen ID cards-related queries. By August 2011, the Ministry had replied to 80 netizens.⁴²³

Despite enthusiastic reactions from the public, the Message Board for Ministers has not been updated since 2 January 2013, when it posted responses by the China Securities Regulatory Commission to netizens' concerns regarding China's stock market and investor interest.⁴²⁴ The Message Board Chart, which allowed the public to see how many messages were received by government departments and how well they responded, was eventually removed from the website. As of December 2014, any attempt to log

⁴²¹For a full list of departments, see the Message Board for Ministers on 9 April 2009, retrieved via Wayback Machine.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20090409075735/http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/8198/149530/index.html> (accessed 8 January 2015)

⁴²²Message Board Chart. 2010. Message Board for Ministers. February 10. Retrieved via Wayback Machine.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20100210034224/http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/8198/138817/index.html> (accessed 8 January 2015)

⁴²³*People's Daily Online*. 2011. 'Gongan bu zhongshi renminwang buwei liuyanban liuyan (The Ministry of Public Security pays attention to the Message Board for Ministers)'. August 11.

<http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1027/15395109.html> (accessed 8 January 2015)

⁴²⁴*People's Daily Online*. 2013. 'Zhengjianhui touzizhe baohuju dui touzizhe guanzhu wenti de dafu (China Securities Regulatory Commission responses to investor's concern)'. January 2. <http://finance.people.com.cn/stock/n/2013/0102/c67815-20070683.html> (accessed 9 January 2015)

on to the Message Board for Ministers resulted in a blank page. There has been no official announcement regarding the termination of the service and it is unclear when it was taken down.⁴²⁵

6.7. Direct Line to Zhongnanhai

Given the success of the MBLL, a new message board named 'Direct Line to Zhongnanhai' (*Zhitong Zhongnanhai*)⁴²⁶ was launched on 8 September 2010 on the CCP's official news website, which is also run by the *People's Daily Online*. Netizens may leave messages for the entire central leaderships and CCP central organs, including all nine members of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CCP, such as the President/ General Secretary and Premier, and departments under the CCP Central Committee, such as the Propaganda Department. Users are able to leave messages only after registration, and they are subject to review by staff from the *People's Daily Online* before being granted access to publish on the website. Users are also encouraged to leave messages via the mobile phone app of the *People's Daily*.

The front page of the Direct Line to Zhongnanhai includes news regarding communications between central leaders and netizens, and selected messages left by netizens. Members are allowed to post comments as individuals or as CCP affiliates to 28 political leaders and 27 party organizations. According to the message board users' manual, there are 26 restrictions on the types of comments permitted. For example, rule number two prohibits any post that 'endangers state security, discloses state secrets, subverts state power or undermines the unity of the state.'⁴²⁷ Violation of the terms and conditions may result in being banned from posting comments.⁴²⁸

Within five days of the Direct Line's launch, netizens had left more than 50,000 messages on the website, with nearly 25,000 for Hu Jintao, then President/ General Secretary, and about 18,000 for Wen Jiabao, Premier at the time.⁴²⁹ Property prices, education, anti-corruption, and food safety were the most popular topics. Around 50% of the messages addressed to the General Secretary Hu Jintao were about rocketing property prices while nearly 30% of the messages for the Premier Wen Jiabao tackled education problems.⁴³⁰ As for messages left for CCP departments, the most popular addressees were the Central Discipline and Inspection Committee, and the Central Organization Department, which is in charge of

425I logged on to the Message Board for Ministers website on 14 April 2014 when it was still live. The termination of the service could have taken place between April and December 2014.

426Located in the west of the Forbidden City in central Beijing, Zhongnanhai used to be an imperial garden and is now a walled compound serving as offices and residences for the top Chinese leadership.

427CCP News. 2010. 'zhitong zhongnanhai liuyanban shiyong shouce (Direct Line to Zhongnanhai Users Manual)', 9 September. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/191862/12639823.html> (accessed 5 January 2015)

428Wang, Xue and Wang Weibo. 2010 'Progress in Dilemma', News China Magazine. December. <http://www.newschinamag.com/magazine/progress-in-dilemma> (accessed 5 January 2015)

429Fazhi Ribao. 2010. "'Go Directly to Zhongnanhai' a website for Chinese to message top leadership'. September 13. <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/sd/2010-09-17/115821122530.shtml> (accessed 5 January 2015)

430Based on my observation of the message board website in September 2010, retrieved through Wayback Machine, as well as media reports, such as Shanghai Government News. 2010. 'Gei zongshuji liuyan renminwang tuichu "zhitong zhongnanhai" (Leave a message for the General Secretary: the People's Daily Online launches "Direct Line to Zhongnanhai")'. September 13. <http://www.shanghai.gov.cn/shanghai/node2314/node2315/node17239/node17241/userobject21ai442004.html> (accessed 7 January 2015)

human resources and cadres' promotion. The majority of posts on these two departments' sections were related to anti-corruption and cadre management.

The Chinese state media points out that the Direct Line message board offers the public a 'new and direct way to reach the top leaders in Zhongnanhai.'⁴³¹ However, no replies were posted by either individual leaders or party organs more than ten days after its opening.⁴³² An employee from the CCP website revealed that the CCP Central Committee Public Opinion Monitoring desk is responsible for selecting and forwarding public messages to the top leaders.

In the meantime, the promotion of the Direct Line to Zhongnanhai has been scaled down.⁴³³ Only one week after its launch, the message board was relocated from its previously eye-catching place on the front page of the CCP News website to a relatively obscure section of the site entitled 'Coverage of Central Leaders,' and the customer service dialogue window has been removed. A few days later, information on the number of messages posted to each leader was no longer available to the public. Furthermore, messages left by users which were previously accessible to everyone had been restricted to a small number of 'selected comments' picked by the website staff. The website's customer service staff suggested that the message board was still in beta stage and further adjustments were likely to be made.⁴³⁴ This leaves room for the closing down of the website if the situation does not go in the government's favour.

By using a digital archive called 'Wayback Machine,' which enables users to see archived versions of webpages across time, I discovered that the Direct Line to Zhongnanhai was taken down between late July 2011 and early August 2011. The message board was active at least until 7 July 2011, the only day in July for which an archived version was available. On a visit to the same web address on 8 August 2011, the webpage was redirected to the CCP's News page (www.cpcnews.cn), and the last messages left by netizens for the General Secretary were updated on 23 July 2011. Similarly to the Message Board for Ministers case, there has been no official explanation of the closure of the Direct Line to Zhongnanhai. Nonetheless, two other message boards have been launched since and continue to run.

6.8. Mass Line Message Board

In June 2013, the CCP launched the first 'mass line' campaign, which aimed to make the party-state more accountable and to tackle four key issues: formalism, bureaucracy, hedonism, and extravagance. Designed to strengthen ties between the people and the CCP,⁴³⁵ an online message board called 'Mass Line Message Board' (*Qunzhong Luxian Liuyanban*. Hereafter MLMB) was set up allowing the public to

431 *Global Times*. 2010. "'Go Directly to Zhongnanhai" a website for Chinese to message top leadership' September 14. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/572909.shtml> (accessed 5 January 2015)

432 Wang, Xue and Wang Weibo. 2010 'Progress in Dilemma', *News China Magazine*. December. <http://www.newschinamag.com/magazine/progress-in-dilemma> (accessed 5 January 2015)

433 Based on my observation of the message board website, retrieved through Wayback Machine, as well as media reports, such as Wang, Xue and Wang Weibo. 2010.

434 Fazhi Zhoumo. 2010. 'Zhitong Zhongnanhai liuyan jizhi yingfa reyi (Hot debate on Direct Line to Zhongnanhai mechanism)'. September 17. http://news.sina.com.cn/c/sd/2010-09-17/115821122530_2.shtml (accessed 7 January 2015)

435 Xinhua Net. 2014. 'Xi urges further "mass line" efforts' January 20. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-01/20/c_133060488.htm (accessed 7 April 2014)

make suggestions and to comment on the party's workings. This website is also hosted by the *People's Daily Online* and its design is similar to that of other message boards. Leaving messages is relatively straight-forward, no registration is required, and netizens may opt to remain anonymous. On the front page, visitors first select which district/ borough, city and province their messages are intended to, and then choose the topic of their message from ten preset topics listed on the website. These include problems in the party and government, the relationship between the party and society, good governance, anti-corruption, extravagance etc.

Like other similar message boards, the MLMB features a chart listing the top ten provinces, cities, and counties that received the largest number of messages. As of January 2015, the website received more than 25,000 total messages from the public. The three most popular topics are daily life (8,451 messages), party and government issues (6,120 messages), and anti-corruption (3,683 messages).⁴³⁶ Editors of the website first sort the messages and then they forward them to the relevant departments, who reply to netizens online and, if necessary, take action addressing the issues raised by the public.⁴³⁷ While visitors can browse thousands of comments on the website freely, responses from only ten party/ government departments were published. The second 'mass line' campaign was introduced in January 2014, which gave MLMB a boost, evidenced by a significant increase in the number of messages left on the board. For instance, a total of 124 messages were posted on MLMB in March 2014. However, an analysis of the number of messages left on the website since its inception shows a constant decline. Only 13 new messages were posted between January and March 2016. It remains unclear for how long this message board will be active, or whether it will disappear quietly like the Message Board for Ministers and the Direct Line to Zhongnanhai.

6.9. Message Board for the Premier

Although the Direct Line to Zhongnanhai and the Message Board for Ministers—designed to access senior officials—were closed, a separate message board service dedicated to one of the top leaders, the Premier, was launched by the State Council in March 2014. This message board, called *Wo xiang zongli shuo juhua* (which means 'I have a word for the Premier,' hereafter Message Board for the Premier), distinguished itself from others in many ways. Firstly, unlike message boards operated by the *People's Daily Online*, the Message Board for the Premier is hosted by the Chinese central government portal (<http://www.gov.cn>) and can be found on Premier Li Keqiang's official webpage. Secondly, while the background colour of the previous message boards is red, which represents the Communist Party, the background colour of the Message Board for the Premier is light blue, the same as the rest of the central government portal (see Figure 2). Thirdly, contrary to the message boards operated by the *People's Daily Online*, which share similar designs—colourful and full of content on the front page, the Message Board for the Premier has a completely different appearance with a minimalist touch.

436Mass Line Message Board, accessed on 7 January 2015. <http://qzlx.people.com.cn/GB/382736/> (accessed 8 January 2015)

437People's Daily Online. 2013. 'Renminwang qunzhong liuyanban dajian goutong xin qiaoliang (People's Daily Online Mass Line Message Board bridging communications)'. November 14 <http://qzlx.people.com.cn/n/2013/1114/c364565-23545385.html> (accessed 7 April 2014).



Illustration 9: Screen shot of the Message Board for the Premier

As part of the nature of the Chinese party-state, the propaganda machine and thought leadership of the CCP are usually intertwined with the government. If other message boards serve officials and departments from both Party and government, the Premier's message board distinctly represents the government only. In the introduction section on the front page of 'I have a word for the Premier,' the rationale given is that the portal was set up by the Chinese government in order to listen to people's suggestions and to act as a bridge for improved communication between the Premier and netizens.⁴³⁸ The introduction is written in a sincere tone which ends with 'What you see is what the government should see; what you hear is what the government should hear; what you think is what the government hope to understand; what you wish is what the government should fight for.'⁴³⁹ According to state media, providing feedback via this channel is meant as a permanent mechanism established upon the instruction of Premier Li, who vowed to govern according to the wishes of the people.⁴⁴⁰

438Introduction, I have a word for the Premier. State Council. http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/lkq_xzlw.htm (accessed 20 December 2014)

439Ibid.

440CCP News. 2014. 'Zongli liuyanban yinling wangluo wenzheng xin changtai (Premier message board lead the way for online accountability)'. September 2. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/pinglun/n/2014/0902/c241220-25589671.html> (accessed 7 May 2014)

The front page of the message board consists of three sections: 1) 'selected messages,' where the five latest messages are published. A dozen more can be found on the 'more' page. 2) 'replies to messages,' or government responses to netizen queries, accompanied by the original questions from netizens. 3) 'leave a message,' where visitors can fill in an online form and send their messages. Registration is not required, but visitors are asked to give their personal information.

Netizens are promised that 'some of the good suggestions will be left on the Premier's desk directly.'⁴⁴¹ By the end of 2014, the message board had received nearly 90,000 messages, or an average of 10,000 each month.⁴⁴² About 40% were related to personal concerns, 30% were suggestions made to the government, and 4% were reports of official misconduct.⁴⁴³ Regardless of the large number of comments made by the public, only a handful received responses from the government. Between March and June 2014, government departments only sent two to three replies per month.⁴⁴⁴

6.10. Functions of Message Boards

As one of the tools of e-governance, government online message boards serve as platforms for the interaction between officials and citizens. The Message Board for Local Leaders set up pages for more than 60 provincial party secretaries and governors, nearly one thousand top officials at the municipal level, and over one thousand party secretaries at the county level, where netizens can leave messages to the relevant representatives.⁴⁴⁵ China's state media suggests that the goal of message boards is to 'improve people's life, solve social discontents, and forge a closer relationships between the party and the masses.'⁴⁴⁶ The deputy chief editor of the People's Daily Online, Li Xinyu, points out that the message board should serve as a channel to collect public opinion, push forward democratic procedure, enhance government efficiency, transform the methods of communication between state and society, and improve governance.⁴⁴⁷ Li Changchun, a member of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee and former Director of the Propaganda Department emphasises the importance of channeling public opinion, and of guiding social issues via message boards.⁴⁴⁸

441Introduction, I have a word for the Premier. State Council.

442Chinese government portal. 2014. 'Jiemi wangyou jianyang ruhe zhida Li Keqiang antou (How does netizens' message reach Li Keqiang's desk revealed)'. December 25. http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2014-12/25/content_2796167.htm (accessed 3 January 2015)

443CCP News. 2014. 'Shubiao yidian, zhitong Zhongnanhai (A click on the mouse links you to Zhongnanhai)'. September 1. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/pinglun/n/2014/0901/c241220-25580861.html> (accessed 2 September 2014)

444Xinhua Net. 2014. 'Zhongguo zhengfu wang kaitong zongli liuyanban (Chinese government port site launches Primeir message board)'. August 30. http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-08/30/c_1112294316.htm (accessed 20 December 2014)

445People's Daily Online. 2009. 'Renminwang difang lingdao liuyanban huo zhongguo xinwenjiang yidengjiang de yiyi (The significance of the People's Daily Message Board for Local Leaders being awarded first prize of Chinese Journalism Awards)', 11 November. <http://leaders.people.com.cn/GB/10356590.html> (accessed 15 October 2015)

446People's Daily Online. 2015. 'Yikuai liuyanban yinian jiejie 11 wan jian wangyou suqiu (One message board helped to solve eleven hundred thousands issues from the netizens)'. January 9. <http://leaders.people.com.cn/n/2015/0109/c178291-26354153.html> (accessed 10 January 2015)

447Jiaodong News. 2013. 'Renminwang fuzongbianji Li Xinyu fayan (A speech by Li Xinyu, deputy editor-in-chief of People's Daily Online)'. May 31 <http://www.jiaodong.net/minsheng/system/2013/05/31/011920683.shtml> (accessed 13 March 2014)

448 People's Daily Online. 2009. 'Renminwang difang lingdao liuyanban huo zhongguo xinwenjiang yidengjiang de yiyi (The significance of the People's Daily Message Board for Local Leaders being awarded first prize of Chinese Journalism Awards)', 11 November. <http://leaders.people.com.cn/GB/10356590.html> (accessed 15 October 2015)

According to official discourse, the role of the message board operated by the State Council 'I have a word for the Premier' is to enable the central government to gain an in-depth understanding of public opinion in order to better serve the people.⁴⁴⁹ An op-ed published on the CCP News website indicates three benefits that the message board for the CCP top leadership, Direct Link to Zhongnanhai, may provide. Firstly, it serves as an ideal channel to collect input from the masses, as the party-state needs to be aware of different perspectives during the policymaking process. Secondly and in reverse, it provides a platform for ordinary citizens to express their political opinions and policymaking suggestions. Thirdly, it opens a new channel for the public to scrutinise the party-state and to report corrupt officials.⁴⁵⁰

To sum up, the existence of message boards strengthens communication between the party-state and the masses, allowing netizens to express their opinions, suggestions, and complaints directly to officials. In the meantime, message boards allow officials at different levels to have a better understanding of the thoughts of netizens and to address their concerns accordingly. According to statistics from gov.cn, the Chinese central government portal, posts left by netizens on the Message Board for the Premier can be classified into six categories: opinions, suggestions, enquiries, personal appeals, whistleblowing, and public incidents.⁴⁵¹ I suggest that government message boards can provide the following functions: a) serve as a feedback mechanism; b) provide a platform to express public opinion; c) strengthen external scrutiny of the state; and d) improve state-society relationships and state image. The following are examples selected from different message boards to demonstrate these roles.

6.10.1. Feedback Mechanism

Message boards can serve as a feedback mechanism for the public to report issues that the government has neglected or overlooked, as the following four examples show. In the first case, a netizen from Lanzhou, Gansu province, wrote to the provincial party secretary, Wang Sanyun, complaining that their neighbourhood, which comprises 1,200 households, had been suffering from pollution caused by a nearby slaughter house for eight years. In spite of protests from the residents, the slaughter house kept discarding waste water and offal via a hole drilled through the estate's fence. The residue smelled and attracted flies in the summer, and froze into a pound in the winter. Residents sent representatives to complain to the district government, and to their dismay, the local government was not only reluctant to tackle the issue, but also arrested the residents. A netizen pleaded to party secretary Wang to intervene.

The message was passed down to the Lanzhou municipal party committee and after investigation a reply was posted to the original message. The party committee first acknowledged the situation to be true, and listed four actions that needed to be taken. Asked by the municipal party committee to react, the district government ordered the slaughter house to stop discarding waste into the neighbourhood immediately, built a new pipe redirecting the waste to a proper septic system, and closed down twelve illegal slaughter

449Introduction, I have a word for the Premier. State Council. http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/lkq_xzlw.htm (accessed 20 December 2014)

450CCP News. 2010. 'Zhitong Zhongnanhai liuyanban gei caogen zhengzhi tigong le hao pingtai (Direct Line to Zhongnanhai provides an excellent platform for grassroots politics)'. September 10 <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64093/64103/12689014.html> (accessed 13 March 2014)

451Jinghua Shibao. 2015. 'I have a word for the Premier' received 120 thousands messages, 3 March. <http://news.qq.com/a/20150303/003582.htm> (accessed 13 September 2015)

houses and processing factories. The residents' eight-year long suffering was solved within five days. However, the district government was not disciplined for its inaction during this time.⁴⁵²

The second instance showing netizen voices being heard by the government via message boards relates to Guizhou province. A group of villagers posted a message titled 'We urge the governor to build a "life line" for us,' addressed to the provincial party secretary and governor, complaining about poor road conditions. The unpaved road concerned, which serves four villages and 8,000 residents, had been built more than a decade before and had suffered substantial damage over the years due to poor maintenance. Without a proper road, local harvests could not be exported to the rest of the country by trucks, therefore hampering the economic development of one of the poorest regions in China. The villagers asked the provincial leaders to build a new road for them.⁴⁵³ A month later, Tongren municipal government, the administrator of rural infrastructure in the area, replied to this request. It acknowledged the poor road conditions and announced that its upgrading was included in future development plans.⁴⁵⁴

The third example took place in Anhui, where a netizen posted a message to the party secretary of the province, expressing his concern regarding the planned location of a gas station, which was planned to be built at a cross junction, in the middle of Tucheng city's largest residential area. Tucheng municipal government replied by stating that the location of the proposed gas station met safety regulations. However, given the strong opposition from local residents, the city's Planning and Development Bureau decided to abandon the original plan and to look for an alternative location.⁴⁵⁵ The party secretary of Tongling city, Anhui province, received a message reporting that villagers from a local village were illegally quarrying and selling state resources. The netizen complained that he had reported the illegal activity previously, but had not heard back from the government. The party secretary ordered a district government representative who was responsible for village concerns to investigate. After an inspection of the quarry, several illegal miners were arrested, machinery was confiscated, and access to the quarry was blocked. The government thanked the netizen for the tip off.⁴⁵⁶

In the fourth case, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) received a message through the Message Board for the Premier regarding a telephone scam.⁴⁵⁷ The netizen, called Zhenwu, expressed his concern about the increasing numbers of scams via telephone and text messages. According to him, those scams, ranging from property transactions and interior decoration proposals to financial management, cause a huge amount of losses among ordinary citizens. Zhenwu hoped that the government could strengthen measures to tackle this type of fraud. A reply from the MIIT acknowledged that the development of ICT had led to an increase in the number of cases of fraud. The MIIT explained in detail how it intended to solve this problem, such as by closing loopholes in laws and regulations, and by

452Message Boards for Local Leaders. 23 June 2014. <http://liuyan.people.com/thread.php?tid=2562602&display=&page=16> (accessed 13 July 2014)

453Message Board for Local Leaders. 13 February 2015. 'Kenqing shengzhang wei women xiujian yitiao shengminglu (We urge the governor to build a 'life line' for us). <http://liuyan.people.com.cn/thread.php?tid=2874040> (accessed 18 August 2015)

454Ibid.

455Message Boards for Local Leaders. 5 August 2014. <http://liuyan.people.com/thread.php?tid=2619186> (accessed 10 August 2014)

456Message Boards for Local Leaders. 13 September 2013. <http://liuyan.people.com/thread.php?tid=2209788> (accessed 13 July 2014)

457Message Board for the Premier. 12 March 2015. 'Gongxinbu da wangmin guanyu zhengzhi dianxin saorao zhaphan wenti de liuyan (MIIT responses to netizen's message regarding regulating telephone scam).' http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2015-03/12/content_2833020.htm (accessed 10 August 2015)

enforcing real name registrations of phone numbers. The MIIT closed down more than eighty thousand telephone lines and intercepted 2.3 billion scam messages. Following these efforts, complaints made by citizens dropped by over 60%.⁴⁵⁸ The four cases above show that netizens could use government online message boards to report issues that might be overlooked or neglected by the state through other channels. At the same time, the party-state can use message boards as a feedback mechanism.

6.10.2. Platform for Opinion and Suggestions

Message boards provide a platform for the public to make suggestions, express their opinions, and participate in the policymaking process, as the following five cases show. The first example concerns education. Chinese netizens were keen to make suggestions to the Ministry of Education, hoping to influence education policies. Their aspiration to improve the field made education into one of the most popular topics on message boards.⁴⁵⁹ One netizen criticised the practice of dividing elementary schools and secondary schools into two categories, key schools and non-key schools. While key schools attract most of the resources, funding, and better quality teachers, students from non-key schools are neglected. The netizen suggested that the government should abolish the key school system in order to build an equal society.⁴⁶⁰ The husband of a village teacher complained about the low salary of village teachers. He argued that their income level was dwarfed by the high living costs and hoped that the Ministry of Education could address this issue.⁴⁶¹ A high school student from a remote county revealed that his school and other schools in the county charged students excessive fees without proper procedures. According to him, the issues had been reported to the municipal and provincial government, however nothing had been done. The student hoped that school fees could be strictly regulated.⁴⁶²

The second case concerns the difficulty faced by many government offices in small villages to attract young and talented people. A university graduate turned village official wrote a long message to the party secretary of Nanyang, Henan province making suggestions regarding the management of human resources in villages.⁴⁶³ After spending seven years as local official at the village level, he pointed out several obstacles that prevent university graduates from advancing their career in local governments, such as the lack of work experience compared with colleagues who joined the civil service after graduation from high school. The netizen suggested that instead of giving out promotions based on the length of service, the government should additionally promote young officials with university degrees who demonstrate a high level of competence. The message was welcomed by provincial officials, who replied and invited him to submit a detailed report to the party secretary and mayor of Nanyang in order for him to follow up.⁴⁶⁴

458Ibid.

459 Jinghua Shibao. 2015. 'wo xiang zongli shuojuhua liuyan chaoguo 12wan (I have a word for the Premier received 120 thousands messages),' 3 March. <http://news.qq.com/a/20150303/003582.htm> (accessed 13 September 2015)

460Message Board for Ministers. 8 March 2009. <http://lianghui2009.people.com.cn/GB/145760/8926126.html> (accessed 16 November 2013)

461Ibid.

462Ibid.

463Message Board for Local Leaders. 7 July 2015. <http://leaders.people.com.cn/n/2015/0707/c178291-27264188.html> (accessed 7 September 2015)

464Ibid.

In the third instance, a netizen named Jun asked the premier to establish a nationwide citizen database and link it with the national identity card system. The database would include national health data, allowing doctors to access patients' medical record regardless of their location. Furthermore, vehicle administration data, the toll system for highways, and electronic payments could all be incorporated into the national database to avoid mismanagement and corruption among local officials.⁴⁶⁵ The message was referred to the National Development and Reform Commission who gave a detailed reply to each of the proposals. It explained that the establishment of a national citizen database had been included in the government informatisation project of the 12th Five Year Plan. The use of the database would be further expanded to other areas such as healthcare, with a pilot scheme in 45 hospitals in 15 provinces.⁴⁶⁶

Health-related issues are another popular topic tackled by netizens.⁴⁶⁷ The fourth case concerns a retired old couple who live with their daughter in Guangxi province. Their employee health care insurance is based in Ningxia province, where they previously worked. As they cannot transfer the policy to another province, they are not covered by insurance in Guangxi. The couple urged the Ministry of Health to amend regulation to allow employee health care insurance to be accessible regardless of the issuing province: 'it is the humble wish of these retirees...we hope that the government can solve this issue as early as possible.'⁴⁶⁸ Another netizen complained about the poor quality and unprofessional manner of health care workers, which he believes is caused by a lack of accountability. He therefore called for healthcare reform to improve feedback mechanisms.⁴⁶⁹

As a fifth example, a netizen named 'hy,' from Gansu province, pointed out that the Internet penetration rate remains low in some rural areas. In one case, villagers bought computers but could not access the Internet as broadband connection was yet to reach their region. Hy argued that the lack of ICT infrastructure hampers economic development in rural areas, and urged the government to introduce regulations to help make the 'Chinese dream' of the peasants true—having access to a broadband connection. This comment was referred to the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), which is responsible for the development of Internet services. A reply from the MIIT noted that it instructed local provincial offices to collaborate with telecommunication companies in order to establish broadband connection in the villages concerned as soon as possible. MIIT additionally explained that regulations promoting better ICT infrastructure in rural areas are already present. Nevertheless, as a result of China's vast territory, it takes time before every village gets broadband coverage.⁴⁷⁰ Although not every comment receives an official response, message boards provide a platform for the public to express opinion and to make suggestions.

465Message Board for the Premier. 22 January 2015. 'Fazhan gaige wei da wangmin guanyu jianshe guojia gongmin shujuku de liuyan (The National Development and Reform Commission).' http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2015-01/22/content_2808037.htm (accessed 8 September 2015)

466Ibid.

467Jinghua Shibao. 2015. 'wo xiang zongli shuojuhua liuyan chaoguo 12wan (I have a word for the Premier received 120 thousands messages),' 3 March. <http://news.qq.com/a/20150303/003582.htm> (accessed 13 September 2015)

468Message Board for Ministers. 17 September 2008 <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1026/8063970.html> (accessed 16 November 2013)

469Ibid.

470Message Board for the Premier. 4 December 2014. http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2014-12/04/content_2786470.html (accessed 16 December 2014)

6.10.3. External Scrutiny

Government online message boards can be used by the public as a tool to scrutinise the party-state, as the following five examples show. The first case demonstrates how netizens used message boards to expose official misbehavior in what the local media branded 'the Brother Roar Incident (*paoxiao ge*)'.⁴⁷¹ In 2010, a resident in Guangzhou went to the government's legal office with a business request. The person behind the desk not only refused to serve him without giving a reason, but also started to shout at him. The resident recorded the whole incident and posted the audio clip on the Guangzhou mayor's online message board, which quickly attracted attention from state media and the government. The shouting member of the government office staff was nicknamed 'Brother Roar,' was suspended temporarily, and asked to apologize openly.⁴⁷²

A similar complaint was made against a local police branch in Tianjin. A netizen went to his neighborhood police branch for a minor issue regarding a marriage certificate. The first three times he was there during office hours, he found the branch closed. When the branch finally opened, the duty officer first tried to redirect him to the police station in town and then told him that the officer in charge of issuing marriage certificates was away, even though half a dozen policemen were sitting idle in the branch. 'What is the point of having a local police branch if five policemen cannot handle a case that can be solved in two minutes?' the netizen asked. The netizen then wrote to the party secretary of Tianjin, who passed on the case to the municipal police department. The latter acknowledged that the behavior of employees in the local branch was against police regulations. The police officers were disciplined, and the case was made public within the Tianjin police system as a negative example. In the meantime, an investigation team paid a home visit to the complainant and apologised for the inconvenience caused.⁴⁷³

In the third instance, the governor of Yunnan province received a post on his message board complaining that local officials in Dawan town made money by hosting banquets where citizens were expected to contribute gifts.⁴⁷⁴ According to Chinese tradition, whoever attends banquets has to offer a cash gift to the host. The netizen accused Dawan officials of using every excuse to host a banquet, from weddings to funerals, discharges from hospital and house warmings. 'There are way too many [of these kinds of banquets]. Our annual income is simply not enough to afford handing out cash gifts,' the post read.⁴⁷⁵ Within three months of receiving the complaint, the county government replied to the message and reported what measures were taken. A new regulation was introduced in order to restrict official banquets to weddings and funerals, and the events had to be registered with the CCP discipline and inspection committee. Any banquet under other pretexts would not be allowed.⁴⁷⁶ In the fourth case, a villager in Liangshan county, Shandong province, reported to the county party secretary that his village leaders had illegally withheld his minimum living standard allowance. Accordingly, the party's Discipline and Inspection

471Xinhua Net. 2010. 'Paoxiaoge wei she fuwu ?(Whom does brother roar serve?).' 23 June.

http://news.xinhuanet.com/comments/2010-06/23/c_12253564.htm (accessed 16 December 2014)

472*People's Daily*, 2010, 'Renminwang difang lingdao liuyanban si sui le (Four years anniversary of People's Daily Online local leaders message board).

473Message Board for Local Leaders, 15 August 2014. <http://liuyan.peeople.com/thread.php?tid=2635750> (accessed 10 September 2014)

474Message Board for Local Leaders. 27 December 2014. <http://liuyan.people.com.cn/thread.php?tid=2811851> (accessed 16 August 2015)

475Ibid.

476Message Board for Local Leaders. 13 March 2015. <http://liuyan.people.com.cn/thread.php?tid=2811851> (accessed 16 August 2015)

Committee of Liangshan county launched an investigation and found a village official guilty of withholding the allowance. The allowance was handed over to the villager while the official concerned and the village party secretary were disciplined.⁴⁷⁷

In the last example, a netizen from Pi county, Sichuan province reported to the county party secretary that game centres in two villages had been turned into gambling centres, many of which received protection from the local police. When gamblers lost money, they stole from local residents. The message posted on the Message Board for Local Leaders not only urged county leaders to take action to close down those game centres but also threatened that '...if you (country leaders) fail to respond, I will report the case to your superior (the municipal government) or the superior of your superior.'⁴⁷⁸ The police department of Pi county replied to the netizen confirming that upon receiving the report, they launched campaigns against six game centres and arrested 15 suspects. Meanwhile, the police increased the surveillance of game centres to prevent them from turning into gambling centres.⁴⁷⁹ The five cases above demonstrate how netizens make good use of message boards as a new tool to scrutinise the party-state and to report official wrongdoing.

6.10.4. Improving the State-Society Relationship and the State Image

In addition to expressing concerns related to the government, message boards can also help the public to solve their personal issues, which in turn could improve the state-society relationship and enhance the image of the state. The first example concerns the household registration system (*hukou*), which is closely related to a person's life and touches on subjects such as education, work, and movement. A couple, both migrant workers originally from Meishan, Sichuan province, told the Meishan party secretary that they did not have their child properly registered with the *hukou* in their hometown. When they tried to register their child in Meishan, they were (wrongly) told that their child permit had expired, and they were therefore subject to a penalty. The local police department where their *hukou* was based was instructed to provide assistance. The child's *hukou* was eventually registered and no fine was issued to the couple.⁴⁸⁰

The second example also involves a household registration, for which a 15-year-old student asked to receive help from the Governor of Shanxi province. As the student's parents were not registered as a married couple, the child could not obtain a *hukou*. Without a *hukou*, he was unable to enroll in a high school. The municipal government where the student lives launched an investigation and confirmed that his situation was genuine. Within a week, his *hukou* was registered and he was able to continue his education.⁴⁸¹ Helping citizens to solve issues concerning their daily life, such as *hukou*, is one of the most

477Message Board for Local Leaders. 27 April 2013. <http://liuyan.people.com.cn/thread.php?tid=2010772&display=&domainid=2&act=domain&page=1> (accessed 15 November 2013)

478Message Board for Local Leaders. 17 June 2015. 'Wo yao jubao fanlan youxiting dubo (I want to report the gambling in game centres),' <http://liuyan.people.com.cn/thread.php?tid=3039921> (accessed 25 September 2015)

479Message Board for Local Leaders. 6 July 2015. 'Wo yao jubao fanlan youxiting dubo (I want to report the gambling in game centres),' <http://liuyan.people.com.cn/thread.php?tid=3039921> (accessed 25 September 2015)

480Message Board for Local Leaders. 17 November 2013. <http://liuyan.people.com.cn/thread.php?tid=2283003&fid=1317> (accessed 18 November 2013)

481Message Board for Local Leaders. 3 March 2014. <http://liuyan.people.com.cn/thread.php?tid=2425359&display=4&page=7> (accessed 17 November 2013)

tangible services that the government can provide. It may thus help to foster closer ties between the state and the public.

In the third case, a tourist from Sichuan province was driving to Shanxi province with his family. They were stopped by a BMW on a highway and robbed. When reporting to the police, he learnt that the same people in the BMW had also robbed another car a few minutes earlier. The victim posted his unpleasant experience on the online message board of the Shanxi party secretary, expressing his disappointment with regards to safety on the highway and to the reputation of the province as a tourism destination: 'I was extremely frustrated...I doubt I would dare to visit Shanxi again.'⁴⁸² Upon receiving the complaint, the provincial police department set up a task force and subsequently arrested eight suspects, confiscated several vehicles and fake license plates, and recovered part of the stolen money. The police department promised that they would take further action to ensure the safety of the province.⁴⁸³

The fourth example concerns a village in Zhengzhou, Henan province, that was undergoing demolition. In the process, 30 households did not receive proper compensation from the government. One of the residents wrote to Zhengzhou party secretary complaining that the local government had ignored their demand, and urged the party secretary to intervene. The netizen said that 'the reason we came to Zhengzhou was to build a better future for our children, however the demolition incident has cast a shadow over the children's lives. What should we do now?'⁴⁸⁴ After a brief investigation, the Zhengzhou government explained to the villager that the 30 households did not belong to local villagers but to migrants, and were therefore not eligible for the standard compensation. Nonetheless, they were entitled to another compensation scheme designed for non-local residents, which offered 1,200 yuan per household per month during the transitional period.⁴⁸⁵ Although the residents did not get what they asked for, they were able to communicate with the government.

In the fifth instance, over 30 orchards were vandalised overnight in Mengjin county, Henan province, by a group of unidentified men and caused the loss of six million yuan. A group of farmers wrote to Luoyang's municipal party secretary saying that they saw a local official among the thugs, but the local government did not respond to the farmers' initial complaint.⁴⁸⁶ The Luoyang government replied that the police arrested one suspect while further investigations were ongoing.

The sixth example concerns a group of migrant workers who sought help from the party secretary in Urumqi, Xinjiang, to retrieve wages which they had not received from their employer. The municipal government office called them within six days to verify the case and, to their surprise, they received their overdue wages the following day. The migrant workers wrote a letter to the Urumqi municipal government and to the party secretary thanking for their assistance. The tone of the letter was full of gratitude: 'Seeing that Director Qian devoted everything to fight for our rights, we were deeply moved. No words can

482Message Board for Local Leaders. 5 August 2013. <http://liuyan.people.com.cn/thread.php?tid=2158509> (accessed 17 November 2013)

483Ibid.

484Message Board for Local Leaders. 31 October 2014. <http://liuyan.people.com.cn/thread.php?tid=2736181> (accessed 17 August 2015)

485Ibid.

486Message Board for Local Leaders. 24 July 2015. <http://liuyan.people.com.cn/thread.php?tid=3095982> (accessed 17 August 2015)

express our feelings, our eyes were full of tears...⁴⁸⁷ The workers also stated that they would be more than happy to work in Urumqi again in the future due to the care that the government shows towards the people.⁴⁸⁸

In the seventh instance, the Ministry for Environment Protection (MEP) was praised by netizens for taking action on tip offs which they received on the Message Board for Ministers.⁴⁸⁹ The following are some of the cases: i) A netizen reported that a foundry in Hebei province was operating without a license. The factory was subsequently closed and fined 200,000 yuan by the local environment protection department. ii) A total of eleven factories in Handan city were reported by netizens to operate without a license and to cause serious environmental pollution. All factories were eventually closed and their machineries dismantled after the MEP intervened. iii) A plastic factory in Jiangsu province started to operate without an insurance and refused to build waste processing facilities. It was later suspended by the local environment protection department, and was subject to a fine of 50,000 yuan.⁴⁹⁰ Netizens were delighted to see positive responses from the government. An Internet user named 'Deep Ocean 168' hoped that more government offices would follow MEP's example and work for the people. Another user believed that the environment in China can be improved as long as the model of 'netizen report via message board, government take action' becomes a norm.⁴⁹¹

Message boards set up by the People's Daily Online and the State Council received hundreds of thousands messages, however not all of them were published on their websites. It is safe to argue that the selected cases, which appear on the message boards, serve the interest of the party-state by demonstrating its willingness to listen to the people. Having said that, one cannot deny that message boards do provide another channel, in addition to social media such as Weibo, for the general public to interact with the state. Through communication between the state and the public on message boards, some of the netizens' concerns have been addressed, personal issues solved, and officials' misconduct corrected.

6.11. Limitations of Online Message Boards

There has been no official explanation regarding the closure of the Message Board for Ministers and the Direct Line to Zhongnanhai, however several factors might have contributed to their short lived service. Firstly, the Message Board for Ministers involved more than 80 various departments from the State Council, while the Direct Line to Zhongnanhai involved the most senior leaders of the CCP as well as sensitive agencies, such as the Propaganda Department. One can imagine that it would have been difficult for every department and leadership committee to consent to the idea of answering netizens'

⁴⁸⁷Message Board for Local Leaders. 17 December 2013. <http://liuyan.people.com.cn/thread.php?tid=2327694&fid=1437> (accessed 20 December 2013)

⁴⁸⁸Ibid.

⁴⁸⁹*People's Daily Online*. 2009. 'Huanbao bu fubuzhang pishi ben wang wangyou liuyuan, qi qi anjian jun dedao chuli (Upon instruction from the deputy Minister for Environment Protection, seven cases reported by the netizens were solved)'. 20 August. <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1027/9899947.html> (accessed 20 December 2013)

⁴⁹⁰Ibid.

⁴⁹¹Message Board for Ministers.

http://comments.people.com.cn/bbs_new/filepool/htdoc/html/9e914a7bac43be9e60d901d5d1374765f9554542/b7906834/l_7906834_1.html (accessed 20 December 2013)

inquiries. Secondly, some departments and leaders could be overwhelmed by the vast number of messages posted by the public. Within a few days of the launch of the Direct Line to Zhongnanhai, netizens left almost 50,000 messages, with nearly 20,000 for President Hu Jintao and about 12,000 for Premier Wen Jiabao.⁴⁹² It may prove too much work to verify and handle the issues raised, let alone reply to each message. Thirdly, listing in a chart the number of messages that each department received and how many were addressed put extra pressure on and embarrassed those slow to respond. While one of the intentions of setting up message boards is to demonstrate that the party-state is willing to interact with the public, failing to cope with the huge demands from netizens on message boards can be counter productive. Taking them down could preclude further embarrassment resulting from a lack of appropriate response from the party.

Among five government message boards examined in this chapter, only three, Message Board for Local Leaders (hereafter MBLL), Message Board for the Premier (hereafter MBP) and Mass Line Message Board (hereafter MLMB) are still active as of March 2016. However, only MBLL and MBP were institutionalised as an interactive platform for the state and society. MBLL is considered to be the only nation-wide interactive platform connecting provincial and municipal officials and netizens.⁴⁹³ In fact, responding to messages left by netizens on the MBLL has become routine for many government offices. As of 2012, at least 19 provinces have issued directives to standardise the procedure of how to handle netizens' messages,⁴⁹⁴ with more than 1,200 government offices at different levels responsible for handling netizens' queries.⁴⁹⁵ Since 2009, there has been an annual national meeting regarding the handling of netizens' messages on MBLL, attended by government officials across the country. These annual meetings also serve as award ceremonies celebrating the outstanding local offices who give the best quality and most consistent responses to netizen requests. In 2012, for example, 87 government offices and 53 officials received awards and were praised as models for others to follow.⁴⁹⁶ Media coverage of this annual meeting since 2009 shows that participants came from a wide range of government departments, including the e-government office of Shandong provincial government, the Bureau of Letters and Calls of Fujian province, and the CCP committee in Heng county, Guangxi.⁴⁹⁷

Meanwhile, a search of the keywords 'message board and directive' on search engines Baidu and Google found numerous relevant documents issued by different government offices, which also suggests that this practice has been implemented across the country and at different administration levels, from provincial to municipal and county. Those directives were first issued by government offices at the provincial level and then passed down to offices at the lower level. The department undertaking this task varies from province

492Global Times. 2010. "'Go Directly to Zhongnanhai" a website for Chinese to message top leadership' September 14.

<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/572909.shtml> (accessed 5 January 2015)

493China Radio International. 2014. '2014 quanguo wangmin liuyan banli gongzuo zuotanhui zai jing zhaokai (2014 national symposium on handling netizens' message held in Beijing).' 19 November. <http://gb.cri.cn/42291/2014/11/19/5571s4771867.htm>

494People's Daily Online. 2015. 'Yikuai liuyanban yinian jiejie shiyi wan jianshi (A message board solves 110,000 cases in a year).'

9 January. <http://leaders.people.com.cn/n/2015/0109/c178291-26354153-2.html> (accessed 10 January 2015)

495People's Daily Online. 2012. '2012 quanguo wangmin liuyan banli gongzuo zuotanhui zai jing zhaokai (2012 national symposium on handling netizens' message held in Beijing).' 27 December. <http://leaders.people.com.cn/GB/178291/218130/353499/index.html> (accessed 15 July 2014)

496Ibid.

497People's Daily Online. 2014. '2014 quanguo wangmin liuyan banli gongzuo zuotanhui zai jing zhaokai (2014 national symposium on handling netizens' message held in Beijing).' 19 November. <http://leaders.people.com.cn/GB/178291/218130/390743/index.html> (accessed 15 December 2015)

to province. In Sichuan, it is the Bureau for Letters and Calls, the agency dealing with petitions,⁴⁹⁸ while in Shaanxi, it is the general office of the provincial government.⁴⁹⁹

Many provincial governments have drawn up a very detailed procedure and workflow. Sichuan provincial government requests the Bureau for Letters and Calls to acknowledge receipt of the messages posted by netizens on the Sichuan section of the MBLL on the same day.⁵⁰⁰ For general suggestions and enquiries addressed to the provincial party secretary or the governor, the case should be solved within three working days. As for more complicated issues involving decision making, the case should be solved within 10 working days. In Shaanxi, the Provincial Government Inspection Office is in charge of going through messages addressed to its top leaders, including the party secretary and the governor, and then passing the case on to the department concerned. For example, if the message is about schooling, it will be handed over to the Education Department. All departments must solve the case within 7 working days and report back to the provincial government who will inform the netizen of the outcome.⁵⁰¹

Compared with MBLL, which has been running since 2006, MBP was not launched until 2014. Nonetheless, it is hosted within the central government portal, gov.cn, which represents the central government and the State Council. While MBLL is dedicated to the CCP and to the government officials and departments of individual provinces, MBP serves as an interactive platform for the netizens and the Premier and ministries of the central government (the CCP's central departments are not included in MBP). In that sense, MBP combines the role of Message Board for Ministers and Direct Line to Zhongnanhai.

Similarly to MBLL, there is a clear workflow regarding the handling of netizens' comments posted on MBP.⁵⁰² The first stage is to categorise messages into five groups: suggestions, enquiries, personal issues, accusations, expressions of emotion, and others. The website receives 10,000 messages each month and the categorising has to be done on the same day that the message is posted. The second stage is to publish some of the messages on gov.cn as well as to pass the case to the department concerned, who are required to reply within 7 working days. The department involved in the case may communicate further with the netizen via telephone to discuss how to address the issue. Once the case is solved, it has to be reported back to the staff at MBP, who then select some the cases to be published on the website as good examples.

Officials from gov.cn revealed that Premier Li Keqiang and other top officials in the State Council are briefed once a month on cases left by netizens on message boards. Some of the messages, in their original wording, will be passed directly to the Premier's office.⁵⁰³ It is reported that Li pays high attention

498Guang'an Bureau for Letter and Calls. http://www.guang-an.gov.cn/affairinfo/allpurpose_detail.jsp?classId=92337842&id=20131029165224-207792-00-000&seachword=%CA%D0%D0%C5%B7%C3%BE%D6&deptid=92337842 (accessed 15 July 2014)

499Shaanxi Provincial Government. <http://www.snedu.gov.cn/news/qitawenjian/201307/26/6783.html> (accessed 15 July 2014)

500Guang'an Bureau for Letter and Calls. http://www.guang-an.gov.cn/affairinfo/allpurpose_detail.jsp?classId=92337842&id=20131029165224-207792-00-000&seachword=%CA%D0%D0%C5%B7%C3%BE%D6&deptid=92337842 (accessed 15 July 2014)

501Shaanxi Provincial Government. <http://www.snedu.gov.cn/news/qitawenjian/201307/26/6783.html> (accessed 15 July 2014)

502Central government portal. 2014. 'Jiemi wangyou jianyan ruhe zhida Li Keqiang antou (How a netizen's message reaches Li Keqiang's desk revealed).' 25 December. http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2014-12/25/content_2796167.htm (accessed 10 January 2015)

503Central Government Portal. 2015. 'Zhongguo zhengfu wang woxiang zongli shuojuhua kaishi yinian shoudao liuyan 12 wan duotiao (Message board for the Premier receives more than 120,000 messages within a year). 3 March. http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-03/03/content_2824474.htm (accessed 3 March 2015)

to netizen messages that reach his office and has on many occasions ordered the relevant departments to deal with issues accordingly.⁵⁰⁴ An op-ed piece written by commentator Ni Yangjun, published on the CCP's news website, points out that the launch of the MBP is not just a façade, but also a new strategy to channel voices from the people directly into Zhongnanhai and vice versa.⁵⁰⁵

Although officials and government offices are required to take action on cases reported by netizens on MBLL and MPB, there are no binding directives stating how many messages one should respond to. The introduction section of the message board operated by the Xinhua News Agency dedicated to local leaders in Qinghai province reads '...we do hope that leadership and government departments at different levels can answer netizens' enquiries in a timely manner, solving their problems and facilitating a better channel for communications.'⁵⁰⁶ The tone of Xinhua, a state media, indicates that it can only encourage officials to participate. How much attention a department or official pays to the message board depends on the willingness of the individual official and his or her workload. For instance, as of December 2015, 560 messages were left for the party secretary of Beijing and 493 for the mayor on MBLL. None of the messages received a reply from either official.⁵⁰⁷ In fact, the leadership of the Beijing Municipal government was the only one among China's 31 provinces that failed to respond to netizens' messages left on MBLL.⁵⁰⁸ By contrast, the governor of Anhui province Wang Xuejun received 204 messages in 2013 and replied to 165 (80%) of them. Another study shows that only 38% of the cases reported have seen action taken and a resolution of the problem (Yang 2014: 32).

Zhang et. al. (2013) observe a selective response pattern among officials regarding posts on their message boards. Studying the Message Board for Local Leaders in Huizhou, Guangdong province, the authors find that although the citizens care most about daily life issues, they did not necessarily receive the highest attention from officials. Meanwhile, messages posted by netizens on fiscal decentralisation, competition between local governments, and officials' promotion received a much higher response rate. As an authoritarian state, China's government officials are not elected by public vote, and thus do not necessarily have to be accountable to the public. It is the government officials' superiors, not ordinary citizens, who have a say in their promotion. Zhang et. al. (2013) argue that when the appraisal of an official is top-down instead of bottom up, the content of the government officer's replies to online requests was most likely to please the official's superior instead of citizens.

In fact, a low response rate is not unusual among government departments. A report published by the People's Daily Online regarding MBLL statistics points out that leaders in six cities in Gansu province did not reply to a single message posted by the netizens.⁵⁰⁹ The monitoring and inspection office in Longnan, Gansu Province published data on the province's reply rates on MBLL. These show that the police

504Ibid.

505 CCP News. 2014. 'Zongli liuyanban yinlin wangluo wenzheng xin changtai (Message Board for the Premier leads a new norm in e-government accountability).' 2 September. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/pinglun/n/2014/0902/c241220-25589671.html> (accessed 16 January 2015)

506Xinhua News Message Board for Local Leaders. <http://www.qhxhly.com/index.Asp> (accessed 4 October 2015)

507Legal Weekly. 2015. 'Nide liuyan, lingdao huiyu le ma? (Has the leader replied your message?),' 8 December. <http://www.legalweekly.cn/index.php/Index/article/id/9169> (accessed 23 March 2016)

508 Ibid.

509People's Daily Online. 2011. 'Renminwang difang lingdao liuyanban: gansu sheng 6 shizhou lingdaoren linhuifu (zero reply on Message Board for Local Leaders among 6 cities in Gansu province),' 24 February. <http://gs.people.com.cn/GB/183283/13991030.html> (accessed 25 September 2015)

department of Longnan did not reply to all four cases referred to them—a zero reply rate.⁵¹⁰ The monitoring and inspection office also points out that two county governments failed to investigate the issues reported by netizens. Nonetheless, the monitoring and inspection office does not have jurisdiction over police departments or the county government. The former could only make recommendations to fellow colleagues in other departments.

The low response rates have also been criticised by many netizens. A thread titled 'What is the point of having a message board?' was posted on the message board for local leaders operated by the Xinhua News Agency in Qinghai province. It attracted 473 viewings from netizens, many of whom shared their frustrations through the comment box in the same section. One netizen said 'Setting up government message boards is supposedly the last stage of promoting mass lines and serving the citizens...However, we have only seen messages left by the netizens but no action was taken by the government. I do hope the provincial leadership can pay attention to this.'⁵¹¹ Another commented that 'it is absolutely a waste of time and useless. It is designed to fool the public,' 'some of the replies (by the government) were clearly a PR show.'⁵¹² This sense of frustration was echoed in a nationwide survey conducted by the *People's Daily* regarding the public's attitude towards e-governance. Only 15% of the netizens in the survey believe that problems posted on message boards can actually be solved by government officials' replies on these websites.⁵¹³ In another survey conducted by the *People's Daily*, 69% of respondents believed that the Internet is the best tool to scrutinise the government and to participate in the decision making process.⁵¹⁴ These contradictory sentiments suggest that although the public has high expectations regarding government message boards, they are skeptical about the actual outcome.

In the meantime, there have been concerns about the selection criteria allowing messages to be published on message boards. A netizen posted on Tianya, one of the most popular online forums in China, saying that he tried to leave a message to the leaders of his province on MBLL asking for assistance, but his case never made it through to the governor because he did not get past the censorship filter.⁵¹⁵ Another netizen complained that cases reported to the party secretary of Jiangxi province and Fuzhou city on MBLL were censored and were never allowed to be published.⁵¹⁶ The Chinese party-state imposes censorship on all media in China, and government message boards are no exception. As with social media, one can expect that netizen posts containing politically sensitive topics and cases involving senior officials will not appear on government message boards.

In fact, content on message boards is tightly controlled. A guideline that helps with the management of the Direct Line to Zhongnanhai lists 26 types of content that are banned, which range from references

510Longnan Monitoring and Inspection Office. 27 October 2015. '2015nian 1-9yuefen difang lingdao liuyanban wangmin liuyan banli qingkuang tongbao (A report on replies on MBLL for January to September 2015),' <http://www.longnan.gov.cn/ArticleDetail.aspx?ArticleID=36894&ClassID=14> (accessed 29 October 2015)

511Xinhua News Message Board for Local Leaders. 24 December 2014. 'Liuyanban yiyi hezai? (What's the point of having message board?),' http://www.qhxhly.com/Title.Asp?board_id=ODE&title_id=MjgyNzc (accessed 4 October 2015)

512Ibid.

513People's Daily Online. 2009. 'Renminwang wangluo wenzheng diaocha xianshi 7cheng wangyou renke wangluo jianou (People's Daily survey on wangluo wenzheng suggests that 70% of netizens welcome monitoring the government via the Internet),' 7 July. <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1026/9603337.html> (accessed 18 September 2015)

514People's Daily Online. 2009. 'weilai shinian shida diaozhan diaocha baogao (Survey on the 10 most challenging issues in the next decade),' 21 December. http://paper.people.com.cn/rmlt/html/2009-12/21/content_427048.htm (accessed 18 September 2015)

515Tianya Forum. 2014. 'Difang lingdao liuyanban: guolv wangmin fatie (MBLL filters netizen's message),' 19 December. <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-4848170-1.shtml> (accessed 16 January 2015)

516Tianya Forum. 2015. 'Wangmin de beiai: renminwang difang lingdao liuyanban chuncui zuoxiu (Sad for the netizens, MBLL is purely for show)' 15 January. <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-4904040-1.shtml> (accessed 16 January 2015)

that go against the constitution to spamming.⁵¹⁷ Some of the categories prohibited such as the subversion of state power, undermining national unity, messages that are against the national interest, and spreading unconfirmed information can be interpreted as restrictions on the freedom of speech. While Zhang et. al. (2013) observe a selective rate of response on message boards by officials and government departments, one has to remember that messages that appear on message boards were filtered in the first place.

6.12. Conclusion

The existence of interactive features on government websites is likely to promote a closer relationship between the public and government since tools such as message boards provide opportunities for citizens to engage officials and vice versa. However, the use of message boards as a tool for interaction is not the result of forward planning at the central level, but a response to the development of a new environment in the Internet age. The State Council Information Office asked government offices to 'proactively and progressively' use government websites, message boards, government Weibo and Wechat accounts, as well as Internet commentators as communication tools to further strengthen the capacity to guide public opinion.

The Chinese government has been advocating e-governance (*wangluo wenzheng*) since 2008, which encourages the public to use the Internet as a platform to interact with the state and to express their opinions, make suggestions, and file complains. Meanwhile, e-governance allows the state to better understand public opinion and to respond to citizens' needs accordingly. Although government Weibo, e-government, and online message boards all serve the purpose of e-governance, the level of effectiveness varies. Even though the Chinese central government portal and provincial government portals provide certain interactive services via mail box and live chat, they are not the main features of these websites. Whilst government Weibo provides popular interaction functions, Weibo itself is a product of a commercial nature. Only government online message boards are designed solely for the interaction between state and society.

Since 2006, the party-state has launched five online message boards dedicated to the communication between netizens and senior officials from different departments in the CCP and the government. Launched in 2006, the Message Board for Local Leaders was the very first online website set up by the *People's Daily Online* for the netizens to engage with party chiefs and heads of government at the provincial and municipal level. The *People's Daily Online* launched another similar service in 2009 called Message Board for Ministers, which was dedicated to the head of each ministry of the State Council. Irrespective of its popularity, the board was taken down quietly around 2014. It had received over 200,000 messages within a year of its introduction.

⁵¹⁷CCP News. 2010. 'Zhitong Zhongnanhai liuyanban shiyong shouce (Manual for Direct Line to Zhongnanhai message board),' 6 September. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/191862/12639823.html> (accessed 10 October 2015)

The third message board hosted by the *People's Daily Online*, the Direct Line to Zhongnanhai, was launched in 2010. Netizens could leave messages for the entire central leaderships and the CCP central organs including all nine members of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CCP. Again, the board proved to be very popular as it attracted 50,000 messages within five days of its launch. Faced with the same fate as the Message Board for Ministers, it ceased being updated a year after it went into service.

In the meantime, a new message board called Mass Line Message Board was introduced in 2013 as part of the CCP's 'mass line' campaign, aiming to make the party-state more accountable and to promote good governance. It is unclear if the website is still active as it has not been updated since 15 July 2015. IOf the four message boards above are all operated by the party newspaper *People's Daily Online*, a separate message board service dedicated to the Premier, Message Board for the Premier, was launched by the State Council in 2014. This message board distinguishes itself by making it clear that it represents the central government instead of the CCP. It remains the main channel for the public to interact with government departments at the central level.

Of the five message boards, only two, Message Board for Local Leaders and Message Board for the Premier are institutionalised as an interactive platform for the state and society. The Message Board for Ministers and the Direct Line to Zhongnanhai disappeared with no official explanation, while the fate of the Mass Line Message Board remains uncertain. This indicates a lack of strategic planning and coordination within the different government departments and leadership. The party-state might have been overwhelmed by the tens of thousands of messages left for ministers and CCP top leaders, which led them to decide to close down the websites entirely. Contrary to the popularity of the Message Board for Ministers and the Direct Line to Zhongnanhai, the Mass Line Message Board only received 383 messages in a year. The latter's failure could be due to its functions overlapping with those of the Message Board for Local Leaders and the Message Board for the Premier, as well as to a lack of promotion.

Even though not every message board achieved the same level of success, their interactive features can benefit both public and state in many ways. Firstly, boards may serve as a feedback mechanism for the public to report issues that the government neglected or overlooked. Secondly, they provide a platform for the public to express their opinions and to make suggestions. Thirdly, they may help to solve citizens' personal issues, which in return improves the state-society relationship and enhances the party-state's image. Meanwhile, low response rates are a major issue undermining the effectiveness of message boards. Even if officials are required to take action on cases reported by netizens on messages boards, there are no binding directives stating how many messages government representatives should respond to. In reality, how much attention a department or official pays to MBLL or MBP depends on the willingness of individuals to use online boards as a tool for governance.

It is worth to pointing out that although MBLL or MBP seems to be popular among Internet users, who left thousands of comments and messages to the authorities, the contents being published on those these message boards are non-sensitive and do not challenge the fundamental ruling of the party-state. One

may also argue that the authorities cherry picking issues that can cultivate a positive image of the state in their responses. However, We we can not ignore the fact that those these government online message boards does provide a new platform for citizens to interact with the party-state. Prior to the Internet age, there were very limited channels for the public to communicate with the state. Message boards as a means of e-governance allow ordinary citizen to express opinions, make suggestions, and scrutinise the government. In the meantime, the party-state is also able to take advantage of this channel as a feedback mechanism and to make itself more accountable. Together with government Weibo and e-government, message boards serve as the main three mechanisms of e-governance that promote a better state-society relationship. Their adoption also suggests that the CCP does not only use the Internet as a tool for propaganda or censorship, but is also willing to interact with the public through a variety of online channels.

7. Chapter Seven: State-Sponsored Search Engines

7.1. Introduction

The Chinese party-state have been implementing various propaganda strategies on the Internet through different innovative methods, including the launch of search engines backed by the government. As mentioned earlier, Internet commentators and state-sponsored search engines are measures not designed for encouraging public participations, but they are innovative ways to control the information flow and direct public opinion. The authorities not only imposes strict censorship on commercial search engines, but also launched its own engine in order to ensure that only government-approved information appears in search results. It indicates the party-state's willingness and capability to adapt and change in the face of new ICT.

The launch of state-backed search engines is by its nature a measure that stands beyond the realm of propaganda, and plays an important role in a larger national strategy. The CCP, under Xi Jinping's leadership, has been pushing the transformation of China to an Internet power (*wangluo qianguo*). In pursuing Internet power, Chinese authorities hope to overcome two challenges. The first is the highly dependence on western, US in particular, technologies and software, which China considers a security threat. The second is the potential of the Internet to act as a platform for subversive influences, overseas and domestic, that challenge the CCP's legitimacy. Enhancing Internet power includes supporting China's domestic technology industry, while also seeking to influence global Internet governance and opinion. In order to achieve this goal, China, according to Xi, must have its own technologies, comprehensive information services, and a sound information infrastructure.⁵¹⁸ During a signing ceremony marking the collaboration between Baidu and state-sponsored search engine China Search (*Zhongguo Sousuo*), the deputy director of the Internet Information Office emphasised that the search engine is a 'key component' in the process of building China as a powerful Internet nation.⁵¹⁹

The inclusion of Internet power in the 13th Five Year Plan indicates the authorities' recognition of the significance of the Internet in advancing domestic innovation and transforming China's Internet economy into a world leader. According to the China Internet Network Information Centre, 79% of Chinese netizens in 2014 reported using search engines while looking for online information, making online search the third most popular online activity, after instant messaging and online news browsing.⁵²⁰ Although search engine giant Google represents 54.5% of the market share worldwide,⁵²¹ it only accounts for 4% of the total

518Shannon Tiezzi. 2014. 'Xi Jinping Leads China's New Internet Security Group.' 28 February. *The Diplomat*.

<http://thediplomat.com/2014/02/xi-jinping-leads-chinas-new-internet-security-group/> (accessed 28 December 2015)

519China News. 2014. 'Baidu xieshou guosou jiakuai bianmin zhengwu sousuo (Baidu join hands with china search speeding up the construction of searching service),' 26 November. <http://www.chinanews.com/it/2014/11-26/6816119.shtml> (accessed 27 December 2015)

520China Internet Network Information Centre. 2014. 'Statistical Report on Internet Development in China.' 17 April.

<http://www1.cnnic.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/> (accessed 20 April 2014)

521China Internet Watch. 2015. 'Baidu, Sogou among Top 5 Biggest Search Engines in the World,' April 7.

<http://www.chinainternetwork.com/13014/top-5-biggest-search-engines-the-world-by-revenue/#ixzz3t1vamKEv> (accessed 18 November 2015)

market in China.⁵²² China's search engine market is dominated by Baidu, which accounted for 85% of the overall market share, followed by Sogou (7%) and Google China.⁵²³

Building Internet power involves safeguarding cyber sovereignty. The essence of cyber sovereignty advocated by the Chinese party-state in recent years is that the Internet is not without borders, therefore should be subject to national laws. China's version of cyber sovereignty also involves counter balancing the domination of the United State in the cyberspace. Search engines operated in China, both foreign and domestic, are required to censor search results in accordance with Chinese law. This practice has been duly obeyed by search engine companies. However, in 2010, Google pulled its search engine services and servers out of mainland China after disagreements with the Chinese government over censorship of search results as well as alleged cyberattacks against Gmail users. The dispute between Google and the party-state is a recognition of the political significance and sensitivity of search engine coverage.⁵²⁴ The governments of Japan, France, Germany, and China have all tried to build their own search engines with different motivations, but only China's initiative materialised.

Within a few years of Google's withdrawal from China in 2010, the country's three main state media outlets, the People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency, and China Central Television all launched their own search engines. They not only compete with each other, but also attempt to challenge the dominance of Baidu in China's search engine market. The state-backed search engines eventually had to collaborate with Baidu as part of their strategy to build a strong Internet power (*wangluo qiangguo*). Given the seemingly unorganised, yet rapid development of government-backed search engines, one cannot help but ask, what are the true objectives of state-sponsored search engines? Seeking commercial profit or fulfilling the same role as Chinese state media to guide public opinion? In this chapter, I argue that in addition to requesting commercial search engines to filter search results, the party-state also introduced preemptive measures by launching its own search engines where it can fully control what message to convey to the public.

This chapter consists of two main parts: the first reviews existing literature and examines the historical development of search engines as a concept and in practice, while the second part is an illustration of my argument through empirical studies. I first review the current literature on search engines, followed by a brief account of the development of government-backed search engines in Japan, France, Germany, Iran, and Russia. I will then look at search engines built with the backing of the Chinese government, namely Goso / Jike by the People's Daily, Panguso by Xinhua News Agency, and CCTV Search by the China Central Television, as well as the latest search engine, China Search (*Zhongguo Sousuo*), launched after the merger of state-sponsored search engines. I conducted empirical research by comparing search results of keywords on China Search, the only state-sponsored engine still in operation, and Baidu, the most popular commercial search engine in China. By doing so, I could draw a conclusion on how China Search disseminates information approved by the party-state in order to guide public opinion in government's favour. I have given an assessment on the limitations of state-sponsored search engines.

⁵²²China Internet Watch. 2015. 'China's Search Engine Market Overview in Q2 2015,' August 4, <http://www.chinainternetwatch.com/13992/chinas-search-engine-market-q2-2015/#ixzz3t1wDIAXH> (accessed 18 November 2015)

⁵²³Ibid.

⁵²⁴BBC News. 2013. 'Google turns off China censorship warning.' 7 January. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-20932072> (accessed 15 May 2013)

7.2. Methodology

Web content analysis was used for the study of the history and evolution of different state-backed search engines. A digital archive service called Wayback Machine helped me study the design of search engine interfaces that are no longer available on the World Wide Web. The research method used in the collection of data for search engine results in this chapter was borrowed from Jiang (2014), who compared Baidu's and Google's results in order to study their sociopolitical implications. To examine how each search engine filters information, I searched 20 keywords in Chinese characters on China Search (Chinaso.com) and Baidu (Baidu.com). Comparing the results from selected queries on different search engines is a typical information retrieval research method (Jiang 2014: 4) that has been used by other scholars. For instance, Wang and Liu (2007) examined search results from Baidu, Google, and Yahoo in order to identify search result patterns.

With an expanding boundary of public discourse, Chinese netizens actively consume news and debates on current issues (Jiang 2010). Following a similar broadening of horizons, this chapter moves beyond censorship and incorporates current events into search queries. I have chosen some of the most prominent sensitive keywords, such as 'Falun Gong' and 'June Fourth Incident' (*liusi shijian*)⁵²⁵, as well as some that are less sensitive, but closely related to current political situations, such as 'Diaoyu Islands', and 'Taiwan Independence'. I recorded and examined the search results returned on the first page of each keyword on China Search and Baidu. According to the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto, Canada, there are 13 lists containing over 9,000 censored and sensitive Chinese keywords compiled by different researchers and institutions on the Internet.⁵²⁶ A list of the 20 keywords chosen for this research with brief explanations can be found in appendix I. Ideally, a larger pool of keywords would yield a more authoritative research result, such as the studies of Internet censorship conducted by the Citizen Lab and King et al (2013, 2017). Since I conducted the my PhD research solely by myself and without the help of a team nor using a specialised computer programme, it would be difficult to conduct a large-scale keywords testing. Having said this, those 20 keywords mentioned above were carefully selected, reflecting a wide range of aspects pertaining to China's political spectrum.

7.3. Literature Review

The literature on Internet search covers a variety of aspects, from politics (Introna and Nissenbaum 2000), to social impact (Halavais 2008), and its legal implications (Goldman 2006). Other papers focus on technical aspects, such as retrieval (Jansen and Koshman 2007) and the development of search

⁵²⁵ In the West, Beijing's crackdown on the democratic movement is more commonly known as 'Tiananmen Massacre', whereas in Chinese language media, it is more often referred as 'June Fourth Incident' (*liusi shijian*). Since this research is on Chinese language search engines, I used the keyword 'June Fourth Incident' instead of 'Tiananmen Massacre' (*liusi tusha*)

^{526A} full list is available on the Citizen Lab's website:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/19eS47Dg086vR1jh9oo51pXstYVT2wft13JGCrnAeU7A/pubhtml>

technology (Brin and Page 1998). With regards to online search in China, current literature does not solely focus on the search engine itself, but also on broader subjects related to the Internet. Western scholarship focuses on censorship (Battelle 2005; Fry 2006; Liang and Lu 2010; Lum 2006; MacKinnon 2009; Xu et al 2011). By comparison, scholarship from China tends to avoid politically sensitive topics and focuses on advertising, technology, business strategy, and user behaviour (Li 2006; Li et al 2007; Wang et al 2010; Wang et al 2011).

Reporters without Borders (2006) conducted the first search engine filtering study of China by comparing Western search engines operating in China and Baidu. Their research found significant variation in the levels of filtering among different search engines. Yahoo.cn censor results as strictly as Baidu, whereas Google.cn and the beta version of MSN.cn allow more information from sources that are not necessarily authorised by the Chinese government. The finding echoes another piece of research by Villeneuve (2008) in which he observes the censorship practices of Google, Microsoft and Yahoo search engines in China. Comparing their search results with Baidu, the studies found that although netizens in China are able to access more information thanks to the presence of Western search engines, politically sensitive topics are censored. In many cases, the search engine company selects the specific websites to be censored. The self-censorship practices can be more comprehensive than the ones imposed by the Chinese government. However, one should note that Villeneuve's (2008) research was conducted before Google pulled its search engine business out of China, and when Microsoft and Yahoo had not yet been marginalised by the rapid expansion of Baidu. Since the search engine market in China today is overwhelmingly dominated by Chinese companies, Chinese netizens' ability to access alternative sources of information via Western search engines is questionable.

Scholarship from China also attempts to compare Baidu and Western search engines' operations in China, but the focus is generally on business aspects. Qin and Zhou (2012) study the impact of Baidu and Google on the structure of the search engine market, on consumer's interests, and on the market performance of individual search engines. The authors suggest that years of fierce competition between these two companies helped to push the development of Chinese search engine technology. Ma (2009) compares the business models of Baidu and Google, and finds that although both companies accept payment from customers in order to influence rankings in search results, Baidu tends to manipulate rankings based on the amount of money it receives, while Google additionally incorporates organic search.

Despite a growing interest in search engines in China, very little empirical research has been conducted. Jiang (2014) examines the sociopolitical implications of search engines in China through empirical studies of China's two leading search engines, Baidu and Google. The study suggests that although Google moved their server to Hong Kong (which enjoys freedom of speech), its search results are more or less as inaccessible as Baidu's within China because of China's censorship program, the Great Fire Wall. The author concludes that search engines can be manipulated to serve political interests, are arbitrary in rendering social realities, and biased toward self-interest (p.18).

While the majority of the literature is concerned with commercial search engines, state-sponsored search engines receive little scholarly attention. This is partly because this new government effort only emerged in 2010, and partly because it takes time for scholars to respond to developments in technology. Exploring the significance of search engines in a nation's information communication and cultural security, Zhang (2011) suggests that in the Internet age, whomever controls search engines also controls the power of discourse, and thus controls the initiatives to disseminate information on the Internet. The author takes France and Germany as examples, both of whom attempt to build their own state-backed search engines. He argues for the importance of search engines in defending cultural heritage as they can serve as platforms to disseminate a nation's cultural legacy. Therefore, building a homegrown national search engine is essential to countries who respect and want to preserve their history. Whereas Zhang's (2011) article concentrates on theoretical arguments, Jiang and Okamoto (2014) examine state-sponsored search engines by drawing from semiotic and critical political economy perspectives. Through a case study of Jike, a search engine founded by the People's Daily, the authors demonstrate that semiotic and political economic perspectives could critically inform users' understanding of complex information intermediaries (p. 89). While Jiang studied both China's commercial search engines and a state-sponsored one (Jike), an empirical study of China Search, the successor to Jike, has not yet been conducted. This chapter will fill this gap.

7.4. The Development of Non-Commercial Search Engines

China is not the first country to explore the idea of setting up state-sponsored or non-commercial search engines. France, Germany, and Japan had all made similar efforts but without much success. French president Jacques Chirac announced in August 2005 that the government would build a new European Internet search engine. Called Project Quaero, the new search engine would have built on 'science and technology that already exists in France and Germany.'⁵²⁷ This new search engine was developed in part to combat the dominance of US companies in the internet arena. Chirac describes it as the 'Franco-German answer to the global challenges of Google and Yahoo.'⁵²⁸ Just over a year after the announcement of Project Quaero however, Germany decided to pull out and develop its own search engine program named Theseus.⁵²⁹ According to a German official, it would not be a search engine like the one that the French want, but an 'information and technology service' that aims to help German netizens navigate the sometimes 'treacherous web.'⁵³⁰

In December 2005, Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry set up a task force which comprises private companies, research institutes, and government departments to explore the possibility of building

527 David Litterick. 2005. 'Chirac backs eurocentric search engine.' *The Telegraph*, 31 August. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/2921407/Chirac-backs-eurocentric-search-engine.html> (accessed 20 October 2013)

528 *Spiegel*. 2006. 'Quaero? Qu'est-Ce Que C'est? Franco-German Rival to Google Flops.' 22 December. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/quaero-qu-est-ce-que-c-est-franco-german-rival-to-google-flops-a-455775.html> (accessed 20 October 2013)

529 Mathis Winkler. 2006. 'Germany Pulls Away From Quaero Search-Engine Project.' Deutsche Welle, 12 December. <http://www.dw.de/germany-pulls-away-from-quaero-search-engine-project/a-2287489> (accessed 20 October 2013)

530 Luke Harding. 2006. 'Germans pull out of European bid to rival Google.' *The Guardian*, 28 December. <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2006/dec/28/news.germany> (accessed 20 October 2013)

its own search engine, Project Voyage.⁵³¹ The search engine market in Japan at the time was dominated by Yahoo, Google, and MSN, which prompted concerns in Japan that the domination of the Western firms could prevent Japanese companies from entering the market.⁵³² The Japanese government planned to invest US\$ 4.3 million into Project Voyage and put the search engine in service by 2012.⁵³³

Nearly a decade after France, Germany, and Japan announced their intention to build a search engine, none of the projects have materialised. Nevertheless, their failed attempts did not prevent the Iranian and Russian governments from trying themselves. The development of domestic search engines was first placed on Iran's agenda in 2010 during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.⁵³⁴ Supported by the Research Institute for Ministry of Information and Communications Technology, Iran launched the beta version of a Farsi language search engine named 'Parsijoo' in November 2012. As Google was the most popular search engine and ranked as the most visited website in Iran at the time, Parsijoo intended to compete with Google's monopoly in Iran.⁵³⁵ Iran's Information and Technology Minister once said that, 'destroying the dominance of Western IT companies in Iran's cyberspace is our most important goal in the current conditions.'⁵³⁶

The Iranian government had blocked Gmail and other Google services in protest against Google's policies of allowing anti-Islam movies to be uploaded on YouTube, which is owned by Google. The introduction of the Iranian state-backed search engine was considered to be an attempt to make the Iranian cyberspace 'pure' from foreign services.⁵³⁷ In December 2013, the Iranian state media reported the launch of another search engine called Gorgor, to compete against Google, Yahoo, and Bing.⁵³⁸ In addition to Parsijoo and Gorgor, the Iranian government launched a third search engine, called Yooz, in February 2015, in an attempt to bypass the Internet-related sanctions imposed by the West over Iran's controversial nuclear programme. Iran's Ministry of Communication and Information Technology claimed that Yooz would not only help Iranians circumvent the US-led economic sanctions and grant the academic world access to the Persian cyberspace, but would also be much faster and secure than existing Western search engines available in Iran.⁵³⁹ With the international sanctions against Iran officially lifted on 16 January 2016, justifying the continuation of Yooz remains difficult. In fact, Tehran never openly explained the reasons behind launching three state-backed search engines and what the differences between them

531Loren Baker. 2005. 'Japan Government Creates Search Engine Exploration Group.' *Search Engine Journal*, 21 December. <http://www.searchenginejournal.com/japan-government-creates-search-engine-exploration-group/2688/> (accessed 27 October 2013)

532Barry Schwartz. 2006. 'Japan To Build Own Search Engine With 30 Japanese Companies & Government Help.' *Search Engine Watch*, 14 June. <http://searchenginewatch.com/sew/news/2058537/japan-to-build-own-search-engine-with-japanese-companies-government-help> (accessed 27 October 2013)

533Xinhua Net. 2006. 'Ribben xiayidai sousuo yinqing kaifa lutu qiqu (A rough journey ahead for Japan's search engine).' 26 September. http://news.xinhuanet.com/tech/2006-09/26/content_5137994.htm (accessed 27 October 2013)

534Daily Sabah. 2015. 'Iran launches its own web search engine "Yooz",' 16 February. <http://www.dailysabah.com/technology/2015/02/16/iran-launches-its-own-web-search-engine-yooz> (accessed 10 December 2015)

535Karim Khaledi. 2012. 'Iran Launched 'Parsijoo' Search Engine,' *The Mideast Times*, 5 November. <http://www.mideasttime.com/iran-launched-parsijoo-search-engine/662/> (accessed 10 December 2015)

536Gholam Rahmani . 2013. 'Iran's Parsijoo Search Engine Adds Translation Service,' *Pars Herald*, 21 April. <http://parsherald.com/irans-parsijoo-search-engine-adds-translation-service/720/> (accessed 10 December 2015)

537Karim Khaledi. 2012. 'Iran Launched 'Parsijoo' Search Engine,' *The Mideast Times*, 5 November. <http://www.mideasttime.com/iran-launched-parsijoo-search-engine/662/> (accessed 10 December 2015)

538PressTV. 2013. 'Iran's new web search engine "Gorgor"' PressTV Vedio channel on Youtube, 5 December. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bvh7HasISX4> (accessed 11 December 2015)

539Vasudevan Sridharan. 2015. 'Iran launches own search engine Yooz to beat internet-related sanctions,' *The International Business Times*, 16 February. <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/iran-launches-own-search-engine-yooz-beat-internet-related-sanctions-1488112> (accessed 10 December 2015)

are. Nevertheless, studies have found that those search engines do filter and censor information deemed to be sensitive and critical towards Tehran.⁵⁴⁰

The search engine market in Russia is dominated by two commercial companies, Yandex and Google, which account for 62% and 28% of the total market respectively.⁵⁴¹ Although the Russian government own shares in Yandex, the company is considered by some government officials as 'politically independent.' The affiliation with the commercial sector makes it worth to reduce its influence by launching a state-backed engine, Sputnik.⁵⁴² Plans for Sputnik were made public in 2013 as the Russian President Putin looked for ways to rein in the forces of the Internet alongside what critics say has been a growing crackdown on dissent and civil society.⁵⁴³ In May 2014, the Russian state telecom giant Rostelecom launched a beta version of its new Internet search engine called Sputnik, to rival Yandex and Google.

What distinguishes Sputnik from its commercial counterparts is that it is a 'safe search' repository, as only 'reliable, full, and official sources of information' can be found among its results.⁵⁴⁴ 'We consider the absence of unreliable information crucial for users rather than the recall ratio,' the chairman of Sputnik explained.⁵⁴⁵ Benefitting from its state-owned background, Sputnik is used as the default search engine at state companies and government agencies. Although government employees may use other commercial search engines, the motivation behind Sputnik is to take state officials' search queries out of 'external hands.'⁵⁴⁶ Also due to its state background, Sputnik was considered by some Russian media as the latest move in the government's ongoing 'crusade against the uncontrolled and subversive Internet.'⁵⁴⁷ Regardless of the state's effort, Sputnik failed to make a significant impact on the search engine market. A year after its launch, Sputnik only attracted 58,200 referred page views, compared with Yandex's 2.7 billion in the same period.⁵⁴⁸ According to Alexa, a company that provides web traffic data, Sputnik's website ranked 18,031 globally and 890 in Russia at the end of 2015,⁵⁴⁹ while Yandex.ru remains the most popular website in Russia, ranking 20th in the world.⁵⁵⁰ Google.ru is the third most used website in Russia and the 35th globally.⁵⁵¹

540Small Media. 2015. 'Selective Truths Revealed: The Case of Iranian Search Engines,' 12 May.

<http://iranpresswatch.org/post/11944/> (accessed 10 December 2015)

541Matthew Bodner, 2015. 'Russia Presents New State-Owned Search Engine Called Sputnik.' The Moscow Times, 22 May. <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/russia-presents-new-state-owned-search-engine-called-sputnik/500727.html> (accessed 8 December 2015)

542Matthew Bodner, 2015. 'Russia Presents New State-Owned Search Engine Called Sputnik.' The Moscow Times, 22 May. <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/russia-presents-new-state-owned-search-engine-called-sputnik/500727.html> (accessed 8 December 2015)

543Tom Balmforth. 2015. 'After 'One Year In Orbit,' Russian Search Engine Sputnik Finds Few Users.' Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 30 May. <http://www.rferl.org/content/russian-search-engine-sputnik-finds-few-users/27044713.html> (accessed 9 December 2015)

544Russia Today. 2014. 'Russia launches "safe search" Sputnik to rival Yandex, Google.' 22 May. <https://www.rt.com/business/160792-russia-sputnik-search-engine/> (accessed 8 December 2015)

545Ibid.

546Matthew Bodner, 2015. 'Russia Presents New State-Owned Search Engine Called Sputnik.' The Moscow Times, 22 May. <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/russia-presents-new-state-owned-search-engine-called-sputnik/500727.html> (accessed 8 December 2015)

547Matthew Bodner. 2014. 'Test: How Does State Search Tool Sputnik Compare to Google and Yandex?' The Moscow Times, 1 June. <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/test-how-does-state-search-tool-sputnik-compare-to-google-and-yandex/501248.html> (accessed 9 December 2015)

548Tom Balmforth. 2015. 'After 'One Year In Orbit,' Russian Search Engine Sputnik Finds Few Users.' Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 30 May. <http://www.rferl.org/content/russian-search-engine-sputnik-finds-few-users/27044713.html> (accessed 9 December 2015)

549Alexa. Search result of 'Sputnik', conducted on 30 December 2015. <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/http%3A%2F%2Fwww.sputnik.ru>

550Alexa. Search result of 'Yandex.ru', conducted on 30 December 2015. <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/yandex.ru>

551Alexa. Search result of 'Google.ru', conducted on 30 December 2015. <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/google.ru>

The main objective of the state-initiated search engines mentioned in this section is to act against the dominance of American companies in their countries. In Iran and Russia, the government also tries to filter search results so that they show approved information. With a similar agenda in mind, the Chinese government began to develop search engines via state media around the same period. Prior to building its own search engines, the CCP saw Baidu as an inspiration in acquiring soft power capabilities and influencing the public. By the end of 2007, Baidu ranked as the third largest search engine in the world, just behind Google and Yahoo, but ahead of Microsoft.⁵⁵² This led the secretary general of Boao Forum for Asia, Long Yongtu, to praise Baidu for its 'important role' in strengthening China's soft power.⁵⁵³ Long, who was a senior Chinese official, further pointed out that soft power refers to the influence of the state in public life. As the most influential Chinese company in the world, Baidu's performance helps to enhance the overall image of Chinese enterprise globally.⁵⁵⁴

The importance of search engines in China's soft power build-up was elevated to a strategic level by the CCP's central leadership in 2009. The plan to construct a state-sponsored search engine was mapped out the following year.⁵⁵⁵ Chinese state media argue that search engines should be at centre stage in the competition for information, as Japan and Europe both placed the development of search engine technology as a priority at the national security level.⁵⁵⁶

A conference regarding the role and significance of search engines, attended by government officials, management from top Internet companies, media professionals, and academics, was held in Beijing in January 2009. Participants argued that since the search engine became one of the main platforms for the public to access the Internet, it can be used to 'channel' netizens to specific information.⁵⁵⁷ Speaking at the inaugural meeting of the newly formed Central Internet Security and Informatisation Leading Group, convened in February 2014, President Xi Jinping first introduced the idea of building China into an Internet power (*wangluo qianguo*), and pointed to Internet security and informatisation as the major strategic issues driving the initiative.⁵⁵⁸

Constructing a powerful Internet nation was incorporated into China's 13th Five Year Plan as one of the key strategic policies. Xi emphasised that China must innovate and improve its online propaganda efforts, strengthen independent innovation of core technologies, as well as raise its capacity in terms of information gathering, handling, and dissemination.⁵⁵⁹ Although Xi did not elaborate on what exactly constitutes 'independent innovation of core technologies,' and how the capacity to disseminate

552ComScore. 2008. 'Baidu Ranked Third Largest Worldwide Search Property by comScore in December 2007.' 23 January. <http://www.comscore.com/Insights/Press-Releases/2008/01/Baidu-Ranked-Third-Largest-World-Wide-Search-Engine> (accessed 25 October 2013)

553China.com. 2008. 'Long Yongtu: Baidu wei tisheng zhongguo ruanshili fahui zhongda zuoyong (Long Yongtu: Baidu plays an important role in strengthening China's soft power).' 29 April. http://www.china.com.cn/tech/txt/2008-04/29/content_15033389.htm (accessed 27 October 2013)

554Ibid.

555Sina News. 2011. 'Xinhua she zhongyidong lianhe tuichu pangu sousuo (Xinhua News Agency and China Mobile launches Pangu Sousuo).' 22 February. <http://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2011-02-22/15175203870.shtml> (accessed 27 October 2013)

556China.com. 2008. 'Long Yongtu: Baidu wei tisheng zhongguo ruanshili fahui zhongda zuoyong (Long Yongtu: Baidu plays an important role in strengthening China's soft power).' 29 April. http://www.china.com.cn/tech/txt/2008-04/29/content_15033389.htm (accessed 27 October 2013)

557IT Sohu. 2009. 'Zhuanjia cheng baidu deng sousuo yinqing zengjiang jingji ruanshili (Expert says Baidu and other search engines strengthen soft power).' 13 January. <http://it.sohu.com/20090113/n261714522.shtml> (accessed 27 October 2013)

558Xinhua News. 2014. 'Xi heads Internet security group.' 27 February. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-02/27/c_133148418.htm (accessed 28 December 2015)

information can be enhanced, a search engine not controlled by commercial companies but by the government does meet the state's needs. The deputy director of the State Council's Internet and Information Office pointed out that 'the goal of China is to become a wangluo qianguo and to provide its people with better Internet technology. The search engine is the most important part [in achieving this goal].'⁵⁶⁰

Besides contributing to building a powerful Internet nation, the development of a state-backed search engine echoes China's quest for cyber sovereignty, which signals its belief that a sovereign state has the right to 'independently choose how they will tread the path of cyber development, as well as issue their own regulations and public policies.'⁵⁶¹ Addressing the second World Internet Conference held in China in December 2015, Xi argued that sovereign equality should be applicable to cyberspace in addition to the physical realm of global politics.⁵⁶² In fact, the party-state attributes the spike in China's Internet user numbers and the rapid development of Internet services to the government's constant resolution to uphold cyber-sovereignty.⁵⁶³ Dismissing criticism of this stance from the West as 'irresponsible,' Chinese officials maintain that the banning of some Western media and tech firms in China was needed because they were 'unwilling to abide by Chinese laws.'⁵⁶⁴ In an editorial piece, the state owned Xinhua News Agency singled out Google's withdrawal from the Chinese market as a negative example, and accused the company of violating a 'written promise made when entering the Chinese market by not filtering its search services.'⁵⁶⁵

China's version of cyber sovereignty also involves establishing a new global Internet governance system that counter balances the domination of the United States. The CCP considers the American cyberspace governance system as 'global unilateralism' since it enjoys an advantage in influencing ideas of Internet governance, and its views often overlook the interests of developing countries. Accordingly, the Chinese party-state advocates the reform of the current international Internet governance system into one that features a multilateral approach with multi-party participation rather than 'one party calling the shots.'⁵⁶⁶ Concomitantly, under the banner of cyber sovereignty, China tries to build an Internet with borders rather than a global one. While the Internet filtering system, the Great Fire Wall, helps to defend its cyber border, a search engine behind the wall that is controlled by the party-state instead of commercial companies, let alone an American entity, is poised to strengthen China's cyber sovereignty. The launch of a search

559Xinhua News. 2014. 'Zhongyang wangluo anquan he xinxihua lingdao xiaozu chengli (The establishment of the Central Internet Security and Informatisation Leading Group),' 27 February. http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-02/27/c_119538719.htm (accessed 29 December 2015)

560People's Daily Online. 2014. 'Zhongguo sousuo yu baidu zhenlu hezuo (China search signs strategic partnership with baidu),' 27 January. <http://media.people.com.cn/n/2014/1127/c40606-26101601.html>

561Xinhua News. 2015. 'Chinese President underscores cyber sovereignty, rejects Internet hegemony.' 16 December. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-12/16/c_134922689.htm (accessed 17 December 2015)

562BBC News. 2015. 'China internet: Xi Jinping calls for 'cyber sovereignty.' 16 December. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-35109453> (accessed 16 December 2015)

563Xinhua News. 2015. 'China Voice: Why does cyber-sovereignty matter?' 16 December. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-12/16/c_134923936.htm (accessed 17 December 2015)

564China.org. 2015. 'China Voice: Cyber sovereignty taboo should end.' 17 December. http://www.china.org.cn/china/Off_the_Wire/2015-12/17/content_37342782.htm (accessed 17 December 2015)

565Xinhua News. 2015. 'China Voice: Cyber sovereignty taboo should end.' 17 December. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-12/17/c_134927991.htm (accessed 18 December 2015)

566Ibid.

engine by the state itself would guarantee that the search results abide by Chinese laws and defend the interests of China in cyberspace.

Interested in building a powerful Internet nation and with the defense of cyber sovereignty in mind, the objectives of China's state-sponsored search engines are not the same as those of France, Germany, and Japan for three reasons. Firstly, although the search engine projects proposed by these countries never materialised, it can be assumed that as democratic governments, they would control the contents of searches as much as the Chinese government does. Secondly, American search engines, such as Google and Yahoo, only account for a very limited market share in China, meaning that the Chinese party-state does not face the same challenges as France, Germany, and Japan in relation to foreign companies controlling online search, and can therefore be less worried about fighting the US influence in this particular market. Thirdly, Baidu enjoys monopoly status in China in terms of market share. The state-sponsored search engine additionally does not compete with foreign rivals, but with domestic ones. Interestingly, there are similarities between China and Russia in terms of their search engine landscapes, as both are dominated by domestic commercial services, while each government attempts to influence the market by introducing its own search engine. In similar fashion to Iran, the development of a state-sponsored search engine strategy in China is troubled by a lack of coherent planning and coordination, as we will see in the following sections.

7.5. China's State-Sponsored Search Engines

7.5.1. People's Search Engine

The Chinese party-state began to set up its own search engines in 2010, with three top-level state media involved. In June 2010, a beta version of the state-sponsored Internet search engine *Renmin Sousuo* (in literal translation People's Search) was launched, with the domain name 'Goso.cn.' This new search engine company, Goso Network Limited (*Renmin Sousuo Wangluo Gufen Gongsi*), was a joint venture of the People's Daily and of its online edition People.com. The stated mission of Goso was to 'build a national search engine as well as a powerful Chinese language search platform with its own intellectual property, and to provide a credible search service for the Chinese worldwide.'⁵⁶⁷ This search engine has been expanding ambitiously since the beginning.

Deng Yaping, a former female table tennis world champion, and one of the best known athlete in China, was appointed as the general manager and president of this search engine company in September 2010. The board of Goso explained the appointment of Deng, who did not have work experience in the media sector, by the hope to take advantage of her 'fighting and enterprising spirit,' as well as her international influence to facilitate the expansion of Goso and to help improve the company's influence both at home and abroad.⁵⁶⁸ Deng, after taking up the new position, promised that she would transform Goso into the 'People's Search Engine' to truly serve the people.⁵⁶⁹

567 □ *People's Daily Online*. 2010. 'Table tennis legend Deng Yaping officially appointed Goso.cn president.' 25 September. <http://en.people.cn/90001/90776/90882/7151013.html> (accessed 25 November 2013)

568 □ *Ibid.*

569 □ *People's Daily Online*. 2010. 'Deng Yaping jieshou zhuanfang: renmin sousuo yao zuo renmin de sousuo (Deng Yaping: renmin sousuo will be the people's search engine).' 30 September.

Goso's news search version 1.0 was formally released on 20 December 2010, providing search features that integrate news, news forums, images, blogs, videos, and microblogs.⁵⁷⁰ In the meantime, a joint laboratory between Goso and the Chinese Academy of Sciences was set up to provide technological support for this new search engine. Compared with Baidu or Google, who have a relatively simple design on their homepages, Goso displays a real-time news feed on its homepage that includes reports from other commercial Chinese media outlets. Deng promised that Internet users would have a fresh news experience as Goso provides them with 'all-around information related to the topic of interest,' and additionally the search engine can analyse the popularity of certain news titles, which may help researchers or media professionals.⁵⁷¹

A few months after Deng's appointment, the former deputy director of the Google China Research Institute, Liu Jun, was hired as the chief scientist for Goso with the aim to strengthen its search technology and boost its influence on the international stage.⁵⁷² Within a year of its launch, Goso had recruited 300 staff, with a high proportion of postgraduates and PhD graduates. 70% of the employees worked in the research and development team.⁵⁷³

7.5.2. The Rebranding of Goso to Jike

On 20 June 2011, exactly one year after the release of its beta version, the Chinese name of the state-driven search engine was renamed from *Renmin Sousuo* to *Jike Sousuo*, meaning 'immediate search.' Visitors to the Goso.cn domain name were automatically redirected to Jike.com. The new logo of Jike comprised blue, black, and yellow geometric blocks that look like a Tang Dynasty puzzle. The original domain name, Goso, sounded like 'dog search' in Chinese Mandarin, and also caused confusion with Sogou, another search engine founded by one of the major Internet companies, Sohu.com. Deng admits that the renaming was a response to suggestions from netizens.⁵⁷⁴ According to her, the new name sounds like 'geek' in English, which refers to a computer expert or enthusiast.⁵⁷⁵ Meanwhile, Jike also has the same pronunciation as 'thirsty' in Mandarin, which can be interpreted as the company's eagerness to develop a high performing search engine technology.⁵⁷⁶ She also explains that the change of name and logo was intended to make it appealing to young netizens, who are Jike's target users.⁵⁷⁷

<http://media.people.com.cn/GB/22114/245184/245185/18184219.html> (accessed 15 November 2013)

⁵⁷⁰ *People's Daily Online*. 2010. 'People's daily launches news search engine 1.0'. 21 December.

<http://en.people.cn/90001/90776/90882/7238113.html> (accessed 25 November 2013)

⁵⁷¹ *China Daily*. 2010. 'Goso goes for share of China's search market'. 21 December.

http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2010-12/21/content_11734869.htm (accessed 25 November 2013)

⁵⁷² *People's Daily Online*. 2011. 'Sousuo yinqin zhuanjia Liu Jun danren renmin sousuo shouxi kexuejia (Search engine expert Liu Jun appoints as chief scientist for Goso)'. 20 February. <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/13960188.html> (accessed 23 February 2014)

⁵⁷³ *Sohu News*. 2012. 'Renmin sousuo buju yidong hulianwang shangshi shangyehua (Goso prepares for mobile network and commercialisation)'. 20 June. <http://it.sohu.com/20120620/n346097899.shtml> (accessed 28 March 2014)

⁵⁷⁴ *Tech QQ*. 2011. 'Gaiming you banqian, renmin sousuo qu guanfanghua (Rename and relocation, renmin sousuo plays down government role)'. 23 June 2011. <http://tech.qq.com/a/20110623/000002.htm>

⁵⁷⁵ *CNN*. 2011. 'Jike.com: Will the revamped search engine provide the most natural results?' 24 June.

<http://travel.cnn.com/shanghai/life/chinese-sports-hero-leads-state-run-search-engine-marketization-639777> (accessed 20 November 2013)

⁵⁷⁶ *CCP News*. 2011. 'Jike searches the future (Jike sousuo weilai)'. 22 June.

<http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64093/64387/14965131.html> (accessed 20 November 2013)

⁵⁷⁷ Loretta Chao. 2011. 'Internet Bigs Come Out for Party Paper's Search Engine Launch'. *Wall Street Journal*, 21 June. <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2011/06/21/internet-bigs-come-out-for-party-papers-search-engine-launch/?mod=WSJBlog> (accessed 20 November 2013)

Not only did the company rebrand and redesign the logo, it also moved to a high end commercial office building, the Beijing World Financial Center, in an area where many international businesses concentrate. Its physical detachment from the party newspaper building may imply that the search engine tries to distance itself from the propaganda role associated with the *People's Daily* on the one hand, and seeks to move closer to the business area on the other. Indeed, during the rebranding ceremony in Beijing, Jike also introduced a commercial search system that provides advertisement slots for China's small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).⁵⁷⁸ Jike planned to provide free advertising services for up to 1,000 SMEs in the following three years.⁵⁷⁹ That was a move interpreted by Chinese media as the first step for the state-controlled search engine to join market competition.⁵⁸⁰

Deng revealed that although Jike is funded by the government, its ultimate goal is to enter the free market. The rebranding was an important step in moving toward marketisation.⁵⁸¹ As for how to make a profit as a commercial company, officials from Jike did not have a clear idea. Many commercial search engines take fees from companies, or clients, that pay for a higher ranking in search results. However, Jike's chief scientist emphasises that search results on Jike.com are not commercially-driven and will never be.⁵⁸² Searching for consumer products, a camera for example, on other commercial search engines in China might yield results crowded by advertisements or discount websites. By comparison, when searching the same keyword on Jike, the results shown on the first page have far fewer advertisements and more useful information including the official website of the camera, and websites dedicated to user reviews.⁵⁸³ This feature may be useful for Internet users, but it inevitably raises question about Jike's business model. Its revenue source is not clear.

On the About Us page of Jike.com, the website is described as a key project approved by the central government to enhance the country's international communication capacity. It carries the important task of building up the image of China and of guiding public opinion.⁵⁸⁴ The deputy chief editor of the *People's Daily* and director general of Jike, Ma Li, sets out the vision for the search engine as furthering the development of the Internet, meeting the demands of netizens, keeping up with information technology innovation, and building a national search engine.⁵⁸⁵ Ma did not elaborate on what constitutes the 'national team' search engine, nor does he explain what happens if netizens' demands are at odds with national

578 *People's Daily Online*. 2011. 'Jike search engine joins competition.' 21 June.

<http://en.people.cn/202936/7853290.html> (accessed 23 November 2013)

579 *People's Daily Online*. 2011. 'Jike shangye xitong shangxian (Jike introduces commercial service).' 21 June. <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/40606/18254350.html> (accessed 23 November 2013)

580 *People's Daily Online*. 2011. 'Jike search engine joins competition.' 21 June.

<http://en.people.cn/202936/7853290.html> (accessed 23 November 2013)

581 CNN. 2011. 'Jike.com: Will the revamped search engine provide the most natural results?' 24 June.

<http://travel.cnn.com/shanghai/life/chinese-sports-hero-leads-state-run-search-engine-marketization-639777> (accessed 20 November 2013)

582 *People's Daily Online*. 2011. '*Renmin sousuo bianlian jike sousuo* (People's search rebrands as jike sousuo).' 21 June. <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/40728/14954134.html> (accessed 20 November 2013)

583 Research conducted on 20 August 2013 by searching the keywords 'Canon camera (*jianeng xiangji*)' on Baidu, Soso, Sogou and Jike.

584 About Us. Jike.com. The website no longer active. Available via Wayback Machine at

<http://web.archive.org/web/20130825140452/http://about.jike.com/aboutus.html> (accessed 4 April 2015)

585 Sina News. 2011. 'Deng Yaping jiedu renmin sousuo xin yumin (Deng Yaping interprets new domain name of renmin sousuo).' 20 June. <http://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2011-06-20/18365669185.shtml> (accessed 23 November 2013)

interests. Jike's chief scientist pointed out that the search engine includes 'correct information' in its search results instead of that which will 'mislead the netizens.'⁵⁸⁶

Since the rebranding, Jike has improved its search performance. It now takes five minutes for Jike to crawl and index a new website to its search engine database, compared with 15 minutes in the past. In the meantime, the search time has been shortened from 600 milliseconds to 20 milliseconds.⁵⁸⁷ It has rolled out a series of new products for mobile phone users and for traditional desktop computers, such as news search, website search, image search, and video search. These features are very similar to those of other existing commercial search engines. What makes Jike stand out are three unique search functions that are not found in its commercial counterparts. On the homepage of Jike, besides news, web, images, and videos, visitors can also search item in 'Expose Station' (*Baoguang tai*), which aggregates news on problematic products, a 'Food Safety' (*Shipin anquan*) section that features a list of unsafe food products, and 'Medicine' (*Yiyao*) which contains information of counterfeit drugs.

These three unique features were the result of the cooperation between Jike and the State Food and Drug Administration (SFDA), who provides all the necessary information including a list of over 188,000 drugs certified by the SFDA.⁵⁸⁸ Internet users are able to enter the name of the drug or pharmacy in Jike's 'Medicine' search and check if the product is counterfeit or if the pharmacy operates with licenses. Cases reported via Expose Station are passed to the SFDA who then investigates and takes action if necessary. Netizens are also allowed to log on to Expose Station to track the progress of the case reported. Since food safety and counterfeit drugs are two of the most pressing issues for the public, the offering of these services gives the impression that the government cares about its people, thus improving the state's image. A commentary published on *Guangming Daily*, a party paper, points out that the introduction of new policy to tackle food and drug safety shows that the government is determined to address these issues.⁵⁸⁹

7.5.3. Pangu Search

While the People's Daily was making effort to increase Goso/ Jike's market share, another state-sponsored search engine, Panguo (Pangu Search), entered the market almost immediately after the launch of Goso. Panguo was the product of a joint venture of two state-owned companies, Xinhua News Agency and China Mobile, who signed a framework agreement in August 2010. Four months later, Panguo rolled out its beta version with the aim to become the number one search engine in China, and

⁵⁸⁶*People's Daily Online*. 2011. 'Renmin sousuo bianlian Jike sousuo (People's search changes face into Jike search).' 21 June. <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/40728/14954134.html> (accessed 20 November 2013)

⁵⁸⁷*People's Daily Online*. 2012. 'Jike yizhounian (One year anniversary of Jike).' 20 June. <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/22114/245184/index.html> (accessed 28 November 2013)

⁵⁸⁸State Food and Drug Administration. 2012. 'Guojia shiping yaoping jianguan ju yu renmin sousuo hezuo dazao quanwei yaoping xinxi chaxun pingtai (China Food and Drug Administration and Renmin Sousuo joins force in building medicine information platform).' 27 September. <http://www.sda.gov.cn/WS01/CL0051/75195.html> (accessed 6 October 2013)

⁵⁸⁹*Guangming Daily*. 2013. 'Wei li keqiang zhongquan zhili shiping anquan jiaohao (Applause to li keqiang's iron fist on tackling food safety),' 28 May. http://www.gmw.cn/sixiang/2013-05/28/content_7780202.htm (accessed 20 February 2016)

one of the leading search engines in the world.⁵⁹⁰ This was the second state-sponsored search engine to be launched in the span of one year.

China Mobile is one of the largest telecommunication companies in the country, and Xinhua News Agency is a central state media under the State Council. This joint venture brings together expertise of two different areas—Xinhua's extensive experience in providing news and collecting data, and China Mobile's mobile network. Combining these two fields of expertise, Panguso intends to offer search services covering more professional and diversified domestic and international news with better accuracy and faster, as well as by integrating traditional Internet search with mobile phone search.⁵⁹¹ News search is the main focus of Panguso, and Xinhua's vast collection of news archives will be available via Panguso.

Pangu is a figure in Chinese mythology who is said to be the creator of the universe and the first living being, and Pangu'sou can be translated as Pangu Search in English. The chief executive officer of Panguso, Wang Hongyu, points out that Pangu was the pioneer who separated heaven and earth from the chaos of the universe, and this spirit reflects through its symbolism the aspiration in the name of Pangu Search.⁵⁹² Wang reveals that the ultimate goal of the website is to surpass Baidu, and the first step in the process is overtaking Baidu in mobile search.⁵⁹³

Besides standard search features such as news, web, images, music, and videos that are no different from other search engines, Panguso introduces additional features that are not found through its counterparts. One of them is search for commentary, which covers comments made by netizens on different weibo service providers, such as Sina Weibo. As a popular social media with tens of millions of tweets posted every day, Weibo content search can be useful to Internet users. In addition, Panguso offers search for practical information including flights, trains, telephone directory, weather forecast, and tourism information. To take advantage of China Mobile's vast mobile network, users of Panguso are able to export search results from their desktops to their mobile phones via the Panguso app, although the software only supports the Android operating system. In addition, users can share search results with others via text message, email or weibo, and can receive push notifications through multimedia message (MMS) on their mobile phones.⁵⁹⁴

7.5.4. CCTV Search

Although Goso/ Jike by the *People's Daily* and Panguso by Xinhua enjoy high publicity in the media,⁵⁹⁵ they were not the first state-sponsored search engines to enter service. As early as January 2010, five

⁵⁹⁰About Us. Panguso.com. This webpage is no longer available on the Internet. Can be found via WayBack Machine at <http://web.archive.org/web/20110315185613/http://www.panguso.com/aboutus.htm> (accessed 10 October 2013)

⁵⁹¹About Us. Panguso.com.

⁵⁹²Pconline. 2012. 'Chaoyue baidu! Panguso dingwei guojiaji sousuo yinqing (Surpasses Baidu! Pangu search positions itself as national search engine).' 21 June.

<http://www.pconline.com.cn/pcedu/softnews/yejie/1206/2834901.html> (accessed 6 October 2013)

⁵⁹³□ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁴Wangtui 365. 2012. 'Pangu sousuo buju yidong sousuo shichang (Pangu search prepares for mobile search market).' 21 December. <http://wangtui365.blog.163.com/blog/static/18207100420121121245777/> (accessed 6 October 2013)

months before Goso.com became available on the Internet, China Central Television (CCTV) introduced a search engine service called *Yangshi Sousuo* (CCTV Search), with the domain name 'search.cctv.com.' Whereas the launch of Goso and Panguo were reported by most of the major media outlets in China, including the *People's Daily*, Xinhua Net, *China Daily* and other commercial portals, the arrival of CCTV Search received limited media attention.⁵⁹⁶ There was no official news release or statement from the CCTV regarding the introduction of this service, but Chinese media reported that the beta version was launched on 14 January 2010.⁵⁹⁷ *Guangzhou Daily*, a newspaper affiliated to the CCP Guangzhou committee, describes CCTV Search as entering the Internet 'quietly,' and the CCTV made no comments regarding its search engine strategy.⁵⁹⁸

The interface of CCTV Search's beta version also offers search for videos, web, news, images, and blogs. It should be noted that it places 'video search' as the first item among all categories, which reflects the nature of the founder's background—video and TV. Performing a search on the beta version shows that search results are restricted to items published by the CCTV.com only.⁵⁹⁹ Content that is not published by the CCTV will not be included in the database of CCTV Search. In this sense, the engine is more like an internal search service within the CCTV website instead of a true Internet search tool as Goso/ Jike or Panguo. Another intriguing fact is that, although the CCTV set up a web-based TV broadcaster called China Network Television (CNTV), video produced by CNTV cannot be found on CCTV Search.⁶⁰⁰

The existence of this search engine drew attention from the media, both domestic and international, in August 2011, when the CCTV criticised Baidu for allegedly allowing libellous comments to appear on its social networking service. The CCTV even set up a whole webpage dedicated to attacking alleged fraudulent advertising and links on Baidu's search engine.⁶⁰¹ Attacks from the CCTV pushed down Baidu's Nasdaq-listed share price by 9%.⁶⁰² Baidu eventually made a public apology via the CCTV's program for publishing fraudulent information, and promised tougher censorship as well as a planned blockage of loopholes in its sales procedures.⁶⁰³ On the surface, it looked like the CCTV, as a news organisation, was

595As central state media, the *People's Daily* and Xinhua New Agency were able to use their resources and networks to promote their search engines.

596Entering the keywords 'Renmin Search' or 'Pangu Search' on search engines Baidu and Google results in pages full of media coverage, but not the same happens with the keywords 'CCTV Search.'

597Sina News. 2010. 'Sousuo yinqing guojiadui dansheng: yangshi sousuo zheng chuyu ceshi jieduan (The birth of a search engine national team: CCTV Search is testing beta version).' 20 January.

<http://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2010-01-20/07593787707.shtml> (accessed 6 October 2013)

598*Guangzhou Daily*. 2010. 'Yangshi sousuo zheng chuyu ceshi jieduan (CCTV Search is testing beta version).' 20 January. Available at <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/40606/10801271.html> (accessed 10 October 2013)

599Tech 163. 2010. 'Yangshiwang didiao tuichu yangshi sousuo ceshiban (CCTV.com launches CCTV search beta version).' 15 January <http://tech.163.com/10/0115/07/5T27857E000915BF.html> (accessed 11 October 2013)

600*Guangzhou Daily*. 2010. 'Yangshi sousuo zheng chuyu ceshi jieduan (CCTV Search is testing beta version).' 20 January.

601Kathrin Hille. 2011. 'Baidu's shares fall after attacks by CCTV.' *The Financial Times*. 19 August. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/6b065c2e-ca43-11e0-a0dc-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3ZUDLJdYn> (accessed 11 October 2013)

602Loretta Chao. 2011. 'Building Trust? CCTV Steps Up Attack on Baidu.' *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 August. <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2011/08/17/building-trust-cctv-steps-up-attack-baidu/> (accessed 11 October 2013)

603Kathrin Hille. 2011. 'Baidu's shares fall after attacks by CCTV.' *The Financial Times*. 19 August.

fulfilling its duty of scrutiny, but its actions also raise questions in regards to its motivations. The Economist, a London based magazine, among other Western news media, pointed out that as the CCTV has its own search engine, it could be tempted to 'nobble' a rival.⁶⁰⁴

Besides attacking its counterpart, CCTV Search was majorly upgraded in early 2013, in a project incorporating both CNTV and CCTV. Search features on the front page now include websites, videos, blogs, microblogs, and podcasts. Although search results on CCTV Search also include items from CNTV, all results are still limited to those published by the CCTV group. Enter 'ebola,' for example, and every item found, regardless of whether it refers to websites, videos, blogs, weibo, or podcasts, is exclusively from cntv.cn.⁶⁰⁵ The fact that both the beta version and the upgraded official version are designed to only include CCTV's own contents may suggest that CCTV Search has little intention to compete with Baidu, or with two other state-owned search engines that provide comprehensive search functions.

7.5.5. Merger of Jike and Panguso

In spite of CCTV Search's limited search functions, there were three search engines backed by the party-state and launched between 2010 and 2011: Jike, Panguso, and CCTV. On the other side of the spectrum are commercial search engines led by Baidu, followed by Google China, Souguo, and others. As of 2012, Baidu accounted for 78.6% of the total search engine market in China, Google 15.6%, Sogou 3.1%, Soso 1.5%, Youdao 0.3%, and the remaining 1% for all the other smaller search engines combined.⁶⁰⁶ Clearly, it is not easy for state-sponsored search engines to fight their way into an established commercial market. Users of Jike and Panguso are mostly civil servants and employees in state-owned enterprises, who are required to use these search engines during office hours.⁶⁰⁷ However, this policy alone is not enough to make an impact. Statistics show that Jike's share of China's search engine market is less than 0.0001%.⁶⁰⁸

Instead of having two 'national teams' contesting with each other and at the same time competing against their commercial rivals, Jike and Panguso merged and then re-launched as a new search engine called China Sousuo (chinaso.com). The merger transaction was conducted with a certain level of secrecy. Since the beginning of 2013, there had been rumours in Chinese media about the potential merger, and on 1 August 2013 a major online news website, NetEase, broke the story, reporting that Jike and

⁶⁰⁴*The Economist*. 2011. 'Bashing Baidu: State television fires on China's Google.' 27 August. <http://www.economist.com/node/21526943> (accessed 15 October 2013)

⁶⁰⁵Keyword search conducted on 5 April 2015.

⁶⁰⁶China Internet Watch. 2013. 'China Search Engine Market Share in 2012.' 4 March. <http://www.chinainternetwatch.com/1972/china-search-engine-market-share-in-2012/> (accessed 13 August 2013)

⁶⁰⁷Chen Yang. 2013. 'Still Searching', *The Global Times*, 10 November. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/823814.shtml> (accessed 13 November 2013)

⁶⁰⁸Caijing. 2013. 'People's Search Engine Denies Layoff Rumors; Says More Jobs Open.' 18 February. <http://english.caijing.com.cn/2013-02-18/112510772.html> (accessed 13 August 2013)

Panguso announced that they would merge and form a new company.⁶⁰⁹ However, both Jike and Panguso rejected the report.⁶¹⁰

Although officials from both companies denied reports of a merger, some of the features on Jike and Panguso were undergoing important changes. By November 2013, two of the unique search features on Jike, 'Food Safety' and 'Medicine,' had disappeared, along with 'Video,' which left four other search features available (News, Web, Images, and Maps).⁶¹¹ A search for maps or web on Jike would be automatically redirected to the homepage of Panguso.⁶¹² In the meantime, the introduction to Jike was removed from the front page of the *People's Daily Online* in November.⁶¹³ By December 2013, any log-on to either Jike.com or Panguso.com showed the logos of both companies displayed side by side on its front page. The 'About Us' section at the bottom of the page was missing. These developments were clear indications of the merger of the two search engines.

7.6. China Search

On 1 March 2014, logins on either Jike.com or Panguso.com were redirected to a new website, China Search (*Zhongguo Sousuo*, chinaso.com), which showed 'beta' and 'under construction' on its front page (See Figure 1).⁶¹⁴ Again, there was no official announcement of the launch of this new search engine, staff from public relations and management made no comment, and its structure was unclear to the public.⁶¹⁵ The official version of China Search was available on the Internet on 21 March 2014. The 'About Us' section reveals that China Search was established jointly by seven central state media, the People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency, CCTV, Guangming Daily, Economic Daily, China Daily, and China News Agency.⁶¹⁶ Although it claims to rely on the news resources and professional talent from these seven media outlets, it is unclear what role each of these state media play in the daily operation of China Search.

⁶⁰⁹NetEase. 2013. 'Dujia: pangu jike jinri xuanbu hebing (Exclusive: pangu jike announces merging today).' 1 August. <http://tech.163.com/13/0801/09/956CQIQ2000915BF.html> (accessed 13 August 2013)

⁶¹⁰Sohu News. 2013. 'Jikes sousuo yu pangu sousuo founen hebing (Jike search and pangu search denies merging).' 5 August. <http://it.sohu.com/20130805/n383361248.shtml> (accessed 13 August 2013)

⁶¹¹Jike.com. No longer active online but available via WayBack Machine at <http://web.archive.org/web/20131103004853/http://www.jike.com/> (accessed 14 November 2014)

⁶¹²Research conducted on 14 November 2013.

⁶¹³Chen Yang. 2013. 'Still Searching', *The Global Times*, 10 November. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/823814.shtml> (accessed 13 November 2013)

⁶¹⁴Chinaso.com beta version. No longer available on the Internet. Can be accessed via WayBack Machine at <http://web.archive.org/web/20140301132721/http://www.chinaso.com/>

⁶¹⁵NetEase News. 2014. 'Jike pangu hebing youyizheng: jiegou bu mingxi yuangong chuzou (Sequelea of iike pangu merger: unclear structure, staff leaving).' 11 April. <http://tech.163.com/14/0411/08/9PHNE8J5000915BF.html> (accessed 8 April 2014)

⁶¹⁶About Us, China Search. <http://www.chinaso.com/home/aboutus.html> (accessed 8 April 2014)



Illustration 10: Screenshot of China Search (beta version)

In the meantime, there is no mention of what happened to Jike or Panguso in China Search's introductory section. It was reported that the deputy editor of the People's Daily would serve as China Search's president, while Xinhua's vice president, Zhou Xisheng, would serve as its chief executive officer.⁶¹⁷ The mission of China Search is to 'construct a national communication platform, strengthen the ability to spread China's voice, and to improve service for the party and the state'.⁶¹⁸ Compared to its predecessors, Jike and Goso, the homepage of China Search is much more sophisticated. It provides seven general search services, such as News, Images, Videos, and Maps; 24 vertical search services including laws and regulations, finance, sports, property, shopping, and food; and 16 practical information search services, for example flight bookings, train timetables, exchange rates, or hospital appointments. It is also scheduled to release a mobile search service.

Since 2010, we have seen an increase in the number of state-sponsored search engines from one to three, with three leading state media outlets each running their own search websites that again merged into one within the span of four years. Before moving on to an assessment of the integrated search engine China Search, I will first answer a question raised in regards to their dramatic development—why have these search engines failed to make an impact? I attribute the outcome to two reasons: firstly, the launch of the engines lacked coherent planning and coordination; and secondly, they struggle to choose between following the party line or market rules. The discussion on the limitations of state-sponsored search engines will be continued in section 7 of this chapter.

617 □ Michelle FlorCruz. 2014. 'China's Government Owned Search Engine 'ChinaSo' Unveiled Amid Increased Internet Censorship Concerns.' International Business Times, 5 March. <http://www.ibtimes.com/chinas-government-owned-search-engine-chinaso-unveiled-amid-increased-internet-censorship-concerns> (accessed 9 April 2014)

618 □ About Us, China Search. <http://www.chinaso.com/home/aboutus.html> (accessed 8 April 2014)

7.7. Empirical Studies of China Search

I argue that the functions of state-sponsored search engines not only fulfill a traditional role of propaganda but they also go further to become part of the strategy of building China into an Internet power (*wangluo qianguo*), while ensuring a lawful cyberspace and defending China's cyber sovereignty. Elaborating on how to advance from a strong Internet nation (*wangluo daguo*) to an Internet power (*wangluo qianguo*), China's Cyberspace Administration points out that a 'positive energy' dominating information in cyberspace not only contributes to the prosperity of Internet culture, but also enhances China's 'soft power' and national unity.⁶¹⁹ A commentary published by the central party paper, *Guangming Daily*, argues that strengthening the state's management of the Internet is the most important aspect of constructing a powerful Internet nation. It not only requires timely collection, analysis, and response to online information, but also 're-legitimises' the state's discourse in cyberspace.⁶²⁰ Meanwhile, the state ought to firmly control the spread of anti-government and anti-rich sentiments, as well as extreme right and extreme left ideas.⁶²¹

Addressing the first conference of the Central Leading Group for Cyberspace Affairs, Xi Jinping, the head of the group, emphasised that conducting public opinion work online is a long-term task, and the Group must innovate and improve the CCP's online propaganda by making good use of the Internet.⁶²² As for guiding principles, it must carry forward the 'main theme' and create 'positive energy' in order to ensure a 'clean and bright' cyberspace.⁶²³ In order to have a 'clean' Internet environment, the party-state also requires Internet content providers to remove 'harmful' information off the Internet. According to the Cybersecurity Law (draft) introduced in 2014, all Internet operators should 'manage' information and perform 'security administration duties' in order to prevent the publishing of unlawful messages.⁶²⁴ Article 43 of the Cybersecurity Law allows the state to request Internet operators to stop transmitting information that is prohibited by law.⁶²⁵

Through this new law, the information available on search engines is not only controlled by ideological means, but also by legal means. China Search has already pledged that it will fulfil its social obligation to

⁶¹⁹Cyberspace Administration of China. 2015. 'Cong wangluo daguo dao wangluo qianguo women zai lushang (From a big Internet nation to a powerful Internet nation, we are on the move),' 16 December. http://www.cac.gov.cn/2015-12/16/c_1117483831.htm (accessed 18 December 2015)

⁶²⁰Guangming Daily. 2015. 'Wangluo qianguo zhanlue: zengjiang wangluo ruanshili (Strategy for powerful Internet nation: strengthening Internet soft power),' 2 November. http://theory.gmw.cn/2015-11/02/content_17575366.htm (accessed 14 December 2015)

⁶²¹Ibid.

⁶²²Xinhua News. 2014. 'Xi Jinping leads Internet security group,' 27 February. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-02/27/c_133148273.htm (accessed 13 December 2015)

⁶²³Ibid.

⁶²⁴The National People's Congress. 2015. 'Wangluo anquanfa caoan quanwen (Cybersecurity Law (Draft) full text),' 6 July. http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/xinwen/lfgz/flca/2015-07/06/content_1940614.htm (accessed 14 December 2015)

⁶²⁵Ibid.

provide search content based on law and honesty.⁶²⁶ The CEO of China Search believes that the Internet industries must recognise the importance of building a rule of law structure in the cyberspace. Search engines should not only optimise their technologies, but also the concept of rule of law.⁶²⁷ In other words, a search engine has the obligation to ensure that the cyberspace filtered through its algorithms operates within Chinese law.

As I mentioned in an earlier section, the CCP has been advocating the concept of cyber sovereignty, according to which each country has its own independent and autonomous interest in cyber development, security, and sovereignty. One of the main goals of this new concept is to counter balance the dominance of the United States in the cyberspace. In an article titled 'Safeguarding data sovereignty,' published by the *People's Daily*, the author accused Google of promoting its own services in its search results, while pushing down services provided by its competitors.⁶²⁸ 'The Internet should be placed under China's sovereignty...We must strengthen relevant regulations and construct an orderly cyberspace,' said a senior official from the Foreign Ministry.⁶²⁹ Considering that part of the motivation for setting up a state-sponsored search engine is to rival the influence of American search engine giants, Google in particular, China Search could play a role in defending China's cyber sovereignty.

After years of rebranding, a merger, and other adjustments, China Search (*Zhongguo Sousuo*) was introduced in 2014 as the only official national search engine that brands itself as representing the state with a mission to spread China's voice and improve service for the party and the state.⁶³⁰ It is important to examine how China Search contributed to the building of a powerful Internet nation, thus ensuring a lawful Internet environment and defending China's cyber sovereignty. In order to place China Search's performance in a more objective perspective, I chose Baidu as a reference point against China Search. Baidu continues its domination over China's search engine market, and despite being a commercial service, which means that it does not carry the same level of national duty as China Search, it is obliged to censor its search results in compliance with China's Cybersecurity Law.

The vice president of China Search explained that 'news items' will be the main focus of their content build-up, and they intend to make their search results authoritative and trustworthy.⁶³¹ It is assumed that as a 'national team,' the state-sponsored search engine should make good use of government resources and focus on content related to policies, politics, and government instead of non-news items such as entertainment and lifestyle, which are the strength of its commercial counterparts. Therefore, in this

⁶²⁶Cyberspace Administration of China. 2015. 'Zhongguo sousuo rijun fangwenlang dafu tisheng (China Search daily visit soars),' 6 May. http://www.cac.gov.cn/2015-05/06/c_1115189064.htm (accessed 12 December 2015)

⁶²⁷Cyberspace Administration of China. 2014. 'Zhongyang wangxinban zhaokai zhongdian wangzhan fuzeren zuotanhui (Cyberspace Administration of China holds roundtable meeting for the heads of key websites),' 27 October. http://www.cac.gov.cn/2014-10/27/c_1112983957.htm (accessed 13 December)

⁶²⁸Ren Yan. 2015. 'Hanwei shuju zhuquan (Defend data sovereignty),' 14 January. <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n/2015/0114/c1003-26382038.html> (accessed 20 December 2015)

⁶²⁹The People's Daily. 2012. 'Waijiaobu guanyuan: wangluo yinggai shi zai zhuquan zhixia (Official from the Foreign Ministry: Internet should be placed under China's sovereignty),' 13 January. <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/70731/16873769.html> (accessed 22 December 2015)

⁶³⁰About Us, China Search. <http://www.chinaso.com/home/aboutus.html> (accessed 8 April 2014)

⁶³¹Cyberspace Administration of China. 2015. 'Zhongguo sousuo rijun fangwenlang dafu tisheng (China Search daily visit soars),' 6 May. http://www.cac.gov.cn/2015-05/06/c_1115189064.htm (accessed 12 December 2015)

section, I conducted empirical studies on how each search engine filters information by making queries on 20 keywords, including sensitive and less-sensitive news items in Chinese characters.⁶³² How results for those sensitive and less-sensitive keywords are treated on search engines reflects the party-state's capacity to ensure the spread of 'positive energy,' to strengthen the 'main theme,' and to cultivate a 'clean and healthy' Internet environment. By comparing search results, we can build a clearer picture of how China's state-sponsored search engine disseminates information approved by the party-state in order to guide public opinion in the government's favour.

In the following empirical studies, I applied four criteria to question aspects concerning China Search: 1) if it acknowledges whether the items that netizens look for are censored; 2) how many search results returned are from government sources; 3) if it reinforces government messages by including its own content in the search results; and 4) if it provides information from websites outside China. The hypothesis is that by relying on these four functions, the party-state tries to manipulate the information available on the official search engine and thus cultivates an online discourse favourable to the state. Since the objective of this paper is to study the Chinese government's Internet strategies, the main focus of data analysis in the following section is on the search results of China Search, while Baidu's act as reference points for comparison.

7.7.1. Question 1: Is China Search in Compliance with Regulations?

According to Article 15 of the Regulation on Internet Information Services adopted by the State Council in 2000, all Internet operators in China, including search engines, are required to filter information perceived to be 'harmful' to the party-state.⁶³³ Although the Chinese government maintains that the practise of Internet censorship is to ensure a safe and healthy Internet environment,⁶³⁴ it never publicly admitted the existence of a list of sensitive keywords to be censored.⁶³⁵ By explicitly informing the user when search results are blocked or hidden through the disclaimer 'according to relevant laws, regulations and policies, some search results may not appear,' China Search as a state-sponsored engine not only admits the government's censorship practice, but also provides an indication of how strict it is in maintaining the Regulation on Internet Information Services.

⁶³²According to the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto, there are 13 lists consisting of over 9,000 censored and sensitive Chinese keywords compiled by different researchers and institutions on the Internet. For this research, I chose some of the most prominent ones, as well as some less sensitive keywords closely related to current political situations. For the lists of keywords, please visit the Citizen Lab at <https://citizenlab.org/2014/12/repository-censored-sensitive-chinese-keywords-13-lists-9054-terms/> (accessed 12 December 2015)

⁶³³State Council of the People's Republic of China. 'Hulianwang xinxi fuwu guangli banfa (Regulation on Internet Information Services),' 25 September 2000. http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2000/content_60531.htm (accessed 9 March 2016)

⁶³⁴Central Government Portal. 2014. 'Zhuanjia jixi wangluo anquan shencha zhidu (Experts explain internet safety censorship system).' 22 May. http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2014-05/22/content_2685331.htm (accessed 2 April 2015)

⁶³⁵Search engine operators in China impose self-censorship based on a list of sensitive keywords. Items in the list are constantly being added. A set of working documents from Baidu's internal monitoring and censorship department is leaked to the public and can be found via China Digital Times at <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2009/04/baidus-internal-monitoring-and-censorship-document-leaked/>

Given a keyword, Table 10 shows if China Search acknowledges that the item is censored, by displaying the disclaimer at the top of the search results. My finding suggests that the Chinese party-state imposes much stricter censorship than its commercial counterparts, and is therefore better at fulfilling its obligation to implement the Regulation on Internet Information Services.

Table 1. Has the disclaimer 'According to relevant laws, regulations and policies, some search results may not appear' been displayed?

Keywords Queried	Chinaso.com	Baidu.com
Falun Gong	-	YES
June Fourth Incident	-	YES
Liu Xiaobo	-	YES
Princelings	-	YES
Chen Guangcheng	YES	YES
VPN	YES	YES
Li Peng Family	YES	YES
Wen Jiabao Family	YES	YES
Xi Jinping Family	YES	YES
Dalai Lama	YES	NO
Grass Mud Horse	YES	NO
Uyghur Independence	YES	NO
Occupy Central	YES	NO
Central Propaganda Department	-	NO
Diaoyu Islands	-	NO
CCP	NO	NO
South China Sea	NO	NO
Taiwan Independence	NO	NO
Activist Lawyers	NO	NO
China Human Rights	NO	NO

Table 10: Has the disclaimer 'According to relevant laws, regulations and policies, some search results may not appear' been displayed?

This study finds that six keywords, namely Falun Gong, June Fourth Incident, Liu Xiaobo, Princelings, Central Propaganda Department, and Diaoyu Islands are totally blocked by China Search. Instead of displaying the disclaimer, it shows a bad link with the following message displayed on the page: 'Error (104) Connection reset by peer (see Figure 1). An error occurred while reading data from the network. Please resend your request.' Completely blocking search results and showing the message 'Error (104)' instead of filtering results and displaying the disclaimer is the highest level of security which ensures that

users cannot get any information regarding the item queried.⁶³⁶ The six keywords' search results are not blocked on Baidu, which suggests that China Search imposes a stricter filtering standard.

错误

您所请求的网址 (URL) 无法获取

当尝试读取以下网址 (URL) 时: <http://www.chinaso.com/search/pagesearch.htm?q=%E5%88%98%E6%99%93%E6%B3%A2>

发生了下列的错误:

- **Read Error**
读取错误

系统回应:

(104) Connection reset by peer

An error condition occurred while reading data from the network. Please retry your request.
正在通过网络读取数据时发生了错误, 请重新尝试。

本缓存服务器管理员: wssupport@chinanetcenter.com

Via:ld15:1 (Cdn Cache Server V2.0)

Illustration 11: Screenshot of search result page of 'Liu Xiaobo' on Chinaso.com

Although the government search engine did not completely block the keywords Dalai Lama, Grass Mud Horse, Uyghur Independence, and Occupy Central, it made it clear that the returned search results are filtered by stating that 'according to relevant laws, regulations and policies, some search results may not appear.' By comparison, Baidu did not block search results or display the same disclaimer. Furthermore, Baidu did not show the disclaimer for Central Propaganda Department and Diaoyu Islands, whereas China Search blocked these items completely. Again, these results suggest that restrictions on the government search engine are tighter than those used by its commercial counterpart.

Hellsten et. al. (2006) suggest that blocking by search algorithms or removing content from computer memory for censorship purposes is to rewrite the past. Blocking and filtering search results are the first steps in feeding Internet users the information that the government desires. By telling the public that some search results may not appear due to 'relevant laws, regulations, and policies' on China Search, the party-state does not intend to hide the fact that censorship takes place on its search engine. It could be a way to show that this search tool rigorously upholds article 15 of the Regulation on Internet Information Services regarding filtering out 'harmful' information. As we can see in Table 1, China Search filters search results more heavily than commercial engines. For example, if a netizen goes to China Search looking for information regarding 'Princelings,' he or she will find nothing as the results are completely blocked. If an Internet user searches 'Occupy Central' on China Search, the information he or she gets should be more restricted than on Baidu, as the latter does not specify that it filters search results.

⁶³⁶ Besides showing the message 'Error (104)', Internet users may receive an explicit message about illegal content. Other interventions are less visible. For example, a very slow speed which delays the loading of search results. For additional discussions on how search results and websites are censored, see, for example, Ben Wagner et al. 2009. "Deep Packet Inspection and Internet Censorship: International Convergence on an 'Integrated Technology of Control,'" Global Voices Advocacy, June 25, 2009. Available on <https://advocacy.globalvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/deeppacketinspectionandinternet-censorship2.pdf> (accessed 18 March 2016)

Table 1 also shows that nine out of twenty keywords are considered exceptionally sensitive since even Baidu, who are relatively relaxed about censorship, show the disclaimer that results are filtered according to 'relevant laws, regulations, and policies.' From Table 1 we can see that five keywords can be considered less sensitive as neither China Search nor Baidu include the disclaimer. My findings in Table 1 allowed me to divide the twenty keywords into two groups: nine sensitive items (censored by both China Search and Baidu) and eleven less-sensitive items (only censored by China Search). For the remaining three research questions set at the beginning of this section, I shall compare the search results of sensitive and less-sensitive keywords to see if there are any differences.

7.7.2. Question 2: Does China Search Link Results to Government Sources?

For the CCP, a search engine can help to construct a powerful Internet nation by promoting the 'main theme,' spreading 'positive energy,' and cultivating a 'clean and bright' online environment.⁶³⁷ This can be done by linking search results to official sources, such as the *People's Daily* and Xinhua News Agency, which have already been approved by the state.⁶³⁸ Table 10 and Table 11 show that 89% of search results of select sensitive words and 70% of less-sensitive words on China Search are from official sources. This sharply contradicts Baidu's strategy, which contained 20% and 23% of search results respectively from official sources. This finding suggests that the Chinese government attempts to manipulate the political discourse by directing Internet users to official information via its search engine, move that is particularly obvious on sensitive topics.

According to a Pew survey on the Chinese Internet use, 75% of respondents said that they trusted information on government websites more than any other kind of online information, while 46% trusted established media, and 28% search engine results.⁶³⁹ If the survey truly reflects what Chinese netizens think, a state-sponsored search engine linking search results to government sources can be very useful to effectively disseminate the party-state's message. Six out of twenty items found on China Search contained 100% information from official sources. By comparison, Baidu's search results regarding 'VPN,' 'Grass Mud Horse,' and 'Occupy Central' contained 0 government sources. This is a huge contrast, especially on the topics of the Dalai Lama and of 'Grass Mud Horse.' While China Search directed every search result to the state media, its commercial rival provided virtually no government sources.

637□ See: Cyberspace Administration of China. 2015. 'Cong wangluo daguo dao wangluo qianguo women zai lushang (From a big Internet nation to a powerful Internet nation, we are on the move),' 16 December. http://www.cac.gov.cn/2015-12/16/c_1117483831.htm (accessed 18 December 2015) and Xinhua News. 2014. 'Xi Jinping leads Internet security group,' 27 February. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-02/27/c_133148273.htm (accessed 13 December 2015)

638□ The definition of official media for this study is state media, such as the *People's Daily*, Xinhua, CCTV, *Guangming Daily*, news outlets belonging to the CCP committees at different administrative level, as well as websites sponsored by the Chinese government. Websites operated by commercial companies, such as Sina and Sohu, are considered as non-official media in this study.

639 Fallows, Deborah. 2008. 'Few in China complain about Internet controls.' Pew Internet & American Life Project. *March 27*. <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2008/03/27/few-in-china-complain-about-internet-controls>

Table 11. How Many Returned Results Link To Government Sources (sensitive keywords)

Keywords Queried	Chinaso.com			Baidu.com		
	Number Of Links To Official Sources	Total Number Of Results	%	Number Of Links To Official Sources	Total Number Of Results	%
Falun Gong	-	-	-	5	10	50%
June Fourth Incident	-	-	-	9	10	90%
Liu Xiaobo	-	-	-	6	10	60%
Princelings	-	-	-	7	10	70%
Chen Guangcheng	11	11	100%	2	10	20%
VPN	13	15	87%	0	10	0%
Li Peng Family	12	15	80%	2	10	20%
Wen Jiabao Family	10	10	100%	4	10	40%
Xi Jinping Family	12	15	80%	2	10	20%
Total/Average	58	66	89%	10	50	20%

Table 11: How Many Returned Results Link To Government Sources (sensitive keywords)

Search engines can be architecturally altered to reproduce dominant political values (Jiang 2014: 16). Displaying search results from official sources could ensure that the government's interpretation of the event or person being searched reaches netizens, subsequently shaping public opinion. Take the 'Dalai Lama' in Table 11, for example. All of the items displayed on China Search are from websites owned by China Search, while Baidu only contains one item from official sources: China.com, a portal set up by the party-state. The rest of the results are all from commercial websites, including Sina, Tencent, Sohu, and Baidu.

As for the content found on China Search, such as 'the Dalai Lama' and 'Chen Guangcheng,' it consists of either statements made by government officials, or negative news about the topics in question. One news headline reads 'Dalai Lama visa denied [by the South Africa government],'⁶⁴⁰ another reads 'Dalai Lama gives up a mousey visit (*cuan fang*) to Mongolia.'⁶⁴¹ The *People's Daily* carries the following headline: 'Chen Guangcheng is America's tool in demonising China.'⁶⁴² Search results of 'Uyghur Independence' on China Search contain articles accusing Uyghur separatists of collaborating with the Dalai Lama and the Taiwan independent movement; the US was funding the Uyghur independent movement; or the leading Uyghur independent organisation—the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)—was listed by the

640 *Global Times*. 2014. 'Dalai lama zao juqian (Dalai Lama visa denied).' 17 November. <http://world.huanqiu.com/exclusive/2014-11/5205085.html> (accessed 3 August 2014)

641 □ Chinaso.com. 2014. 'Dalai lama fangqi cuanfang menggu (Dalai lama gives up a mousey visit to Mongolia).' 21 August. http://world.chinaso.com/detail/201408/t20140821_2156665.html (accessed 23 August 2014)

642 □ People's Daily Online. 2012. 'Chen Guangcheng shi meiguo mohei zhongguo gongju (Chen Guangcheng is American's tool in demonising China).' 4 May. <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/17804562.html> (accessed 3 August 2014)

United Nations as a terrorism organization. Not a single item displayed refers to the Chinese government's suppression of the Uyghur people.

Table 12. How Many Returned Results Link To Government Sources (less-sensitive keywords)

Keywords Queried	Chinaso.com			Baidu.com		
	Number Of Links To Official Sources	Total Number Of Results	%	Number Of Links To Official Sources	Total Number Of Results	%
Dalai Lama	10	10	100%	1	14	7%
Grass Mud Horse	11	11	100%	0	14	0%
Uyghur Independence	8	11	73%	2	12	17%
Occupy Central	12	12	100%	0	12	0%
Central Propaganda Department	-	-	-	7	16	44%
Diaoyu Islands	-	-	-	3	14	21%
CCP	12	12	100%	6	14	43%
South China Sea	3	11	27%	3	18	17%
Taiwan Independence	4	12	33%	5	14	36%
Activist Lawyer	1	10	10%	3	16	19%
China Human Rights	8	10	80%	7	16	44%
Total/Average	69	99	70%	37	160	23%

Table 12: How Many Returned Results Link To Government Sources (less-sensitive keywords)

Although there have been reports in Western media regarding the corruption of family members of the former Chinese Premier Li Peng, Wen Jiabo, and the current Chinese leader Xi Jinping, search results on China Search and Baidu of 'Li Peng Family,' 'Wen Jiabao Family,' and 'Xi Jinping Family' do not mention the alleged corruption cases. Take 'Wen Jiabao Family' for example: five of the search results were from the *People's Daily* and CCTV, and contain the same article suggesting that Wen Jiabao was born into a wealthy intellectual family, and recalling how his grandfather established a primary school to help poor children in the 1920s.⁶⁴³ In 2014, there was a mass anti-Hong Kong government movement called

⁶⁴³Search results of 'Wen Jiabao Family' on China Search, <http://www.chinaso.com/search/pagesearch.htm?q=温家宝家族> (accessed 13 November 2015)

'Occupy Central.' Protesters were asking for more democracy in Hong Kong, and indirectly expressing their dissatisfaction with Beijing. Search results of Occupy Central on China Search all pointed to the illegal aspects of the movement and to how much disruption it caused in Hong Kong.

The keyword 'CCP' on China Search returned 100% of results from official sources, including an introduction to the CCP produced by China Search itself, the official news websites of the CCP, the portal of the Central Party School, and the CCP's anti-corruption portal. Search results regarding 'VPN' (Virtual Private Network) on China Search contain not a single item on the installation of VPN software that is designed to circumvent the Great Fire Wall built by the Chinese government. In summary, the findings in Table 2 and Table 2.1 demonstrate that the party-state aims to convey official messages to netizens via its search engine by overwhelmingly publishing results from official sources.

7.7.3. Question 3: Does China Search Tend to Include its Own Content?

Displaying search firms' own views, and favouring the placement of search engines' own services while disfavouring competitors' sites are tactics defined in current literature as search results bias (Edelman, 2011). Wright (2011) and Edelman (2011) have found bias in Google's search results as well as Microsoft's Bing. My study found that search results bias also exists on China Search. Similar to showing results from official sources, displaying search results produced by sister services of China Search is a further step which ensures that the information made available is in line with the government's position.

Table 13 and Table 14 show the tendency of China Search and Baidu to include their own content in search results. Compared with Baidu, China Search includes more content from websites owned by Chinaso.com. One third of sensitive keyword results and a quarter of less-sensitive keyword searches on China Search were hosted by its sister websites, while Baidu linked 12% and 26% of search results respectively to its own websites. We can see in Table 2 that China Search includes a substantial amount of search results from official sources (89% for sensitive items and 70% for less-sensitive items), and far fewer results link back to its own content, as shown in Table 13 and Table 14. One of the explanations is that China Search has yet to develop enough content on its sister services to which it can link from its homepage. Nonetheless, the site has been expanding rapidly. News stories listed in the 'company news' section of China Search show that it kept launching new services, such as China Search Military and China Search Financial.⁶⁴⁴ Its recruitment section was also full of job advertisements, mostly seeking software engineers, from Android to C/C++, and information security to Java, as well as journalists based in different locations across China.⁶⁴⁵

644 □ China Search. 'gongsi dongtai (company news). <http://hr.chinaso.com/gsd/index.html> (accessed 20 February 2016)

645 □ China Search. 'zhao ping (recruitment). <http://hr.chinaso.com/job/find?type=1&workCity=&category=&p=1&title=> (accessed 20 February 2016)

Table 13 How Many Links To Own Content (sensitive keywords)

Keywords Queried	Chinaso.com			Baidu.com		
	Number Of links to its own Contents	Total Number Of Results	%	Number Of links to its own Contents	Total Number Of Results	%
Falun Gong	-	-	-	1	10	10%
June Fourth Incident	-	-	-	1	10	10%
Liu Xiaobo	-	-	-	2	10	20%
Princelings	-	-	-	1	10	10%
Chen Guangcheng	1	11	9%	3	10	30%
VPN	6	15	40%	1	10	10%
Li Peng Family	1	15	6.7%	3	10	30%
Wen Jiabao Family	1	10	10%	1	10	10%
Xi Jinping Family	12	15	80%	2	10	20%
Total/Average	21	66	32%	11	90	12%

Table 13: How Many Links To Own Content (sensitive keywords)

Generally speaking, the more sensitive the keywords, the higher the proportion of search results linking back to the home, state-backed website China Search. 12 out of 15 results found regarding 'Xi Jinping Family' on China Search are produced by other branches of China Search, such as news.chinaso.com, politics.chinaso.com, and world.chinaso.com, and contain nothing about Xi's family. The remaining three items are from major commercial websites, Netease and Sohu. By comparison, no more than 10% of search results of 'Li Peng Family' and 'Wen Jiabao Family' were from China Search. Only one item regarding 'Wen Jiabao Family' on China Search linked to its own website, world.chinaso.com. The rest of the results were from the leading state media, including China Daily, CCTV, and the *People's Daily*. The most likely explanation is that both Li and Wen are former Premiers who retired from day-to-day politics, therefore making searches of information relating to them less sensitive than in the case of current leaders. By comparison, Xi is the current President and CCP General Secretary, whose image needs to be closely guarded.

Table 14 How Many Links To Own Content (less-sensitive keywords)

Keywords Queried	Chinaso.com			Baidu.com		
	Number Of links to its own Contents	Total Number Of Results	%	Number Of links to its own Contents	Total Number Of Results	%
Dalai Lama	10	10	100%	5	14	36%
Grass Mud Horse	7	11	64%	3	14	21%
Uyghur Independence	3	11	27%	5	12	42%
Occupy Central	2	12	17%	3	12	25%
Central Propaganda Department	-	-	-	7	16	44%
Diaoyu Islands	-	-	-	3	14	21%
CCP	3	12	25%	3	14	21%
South China Sea	0	11	0%	5	18	28%
Taiwan Independence	2	12	17%	2	14	14%
Activist Lawyer	1	10	10%	3	16	19%
China Human Rights	0	10	0%	2	16	13%
Total/Average	28	99	27%	41	160	26%

Table 14: How Many Links To Own Content (less-sensitive keywords)

It is intriguing to find that every single search result of the 'Dalai Lama' on China Search came from other websites owned by China Search, an even higher proportion than 'Xi Jinping Family.' One of the search results was from China Search encyclopaedia (*guosou baike*) dedicated to the current 14th Dalai Lama, which gives a detailed account of his life, and blames him for the 1959 uprising in Tibet. A paragraph in bold stated that 'the Dalai clique had carefully planned, organized, and premeditated the riots in the Tibetan capital Lhasa in 1987, 1989 as well as the "3/14 vandalism, burning, and serious violent crime" in 2008.'⁶⁴⁶ Other search results included negative news reports regarding the Dalai Lama such as Pope Francis refusing to meet him; or a senior Chinese official analysing the reasons of the 'decline of the Dalai Lama's status on the international stage.' It is obvious that instead of providing information from different

⁶⁴⁶ Guosou Baike. 'Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso'. <http://baike.chinaso.com/wiki/doc-view-47183.html> (accessed 13 November 2015)

sources, all data available on China Search regarding the Dalai Lama was carefully filtered to portray him negatively, which is in accordance with the Chinese government position.

In order to access websites blocked in China, such as Facebook, Youtube and Twitter, Chinese netizens have to install virtual private network (VPN) software to bypass the fire wall. A search for the keywords 'VPN' on China Search yielded 40% of results referring to the state search engine's own content. Most of the headlines were news of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), explaining the necessity of blocking VPN in China to manage 'harmful information.' Nevertheless, this study found a particularly interesting detail in the way China Search encyclopaedia (*guosou baike*) explains VPN. It admits that the Chinese government control freedom of speech and employ the Great Firewall to prevent people from accessing 'liberal ideas.' Therefore, netizens have to circumvent the firewall through software if they want to reach the prohibited information.⁶⁴⁷ It is not clear who wrote this entry and why it is allowed to remain online.

Although seven out of eleven search results of 'Grass Mud Horse' linked to China Search's own websites, they were unanimously apolitical. They included adorable photos of alpaca, a comparison of alpaca and the Angora rabbit, and news about the arrival of an alpaca to the zoo in Tianjin city. By directing netizens to non-political areas, the original connotation of 'Grass Mud Horse,' which represents a form of symbolic defiance of China's Internet censorship, is buried by China Search. Findings in this section show that the proportion of search results linking back to China Search's own content is not very high compared with search results linking to state media or to the government department. However, in the case of some sensitive topics, including 'VPN' and 'Xi Jinping family,' links to its own content were visibly more prominent.

7.7.4. Question 4: Does China Search Safeguard Cyber Sovereignty?

Governments guard national borders in order to control the flow of traffic. Although the Internet has physical borders, search engines are a common gateway crossing material boundaries that can be subject to government control (Halavais, 2013). States increasingly consider information about governments, citizens, companies, and other entities as a fundamental source of power. Assertions of 'information sovereignty' (Price, 2002) and 'Internet sovereignty' (Jiang, 2010a) have grown more audible, creating considerable challenges for influencers of the global Internet governance. The CCP believe that sovereign equality should be applicable to cyberspace, therefore making the Internet subject to national laws. Virtually everything published in China is censored, while websites outside China are beyond the control of the party-state, and may thus contain items that violate Chinese laws.

The use of the term 'cyber sovereignty' has allowed the Chinese party-state to take a more confident approach, implying that control of the Internet is part of China being a strong nation.⁶⁴⁸ By looking at

⁶⁴⁷Guosou Baike. Fanqiang (circumventing the wall). <http://baike.chinaso.com/wiki/doc-view-98483.html> (accessed 25 July 2014)

⁶⁴⁸□ Sheehan, Matt. 2015. 'Here's How China's Trying To Rewrite The Rules Of The Global Internet: "Cyber sovereignty" lets censors fence off online content.' The Huffington Post. 16 December. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/china-cyber-sovereignty_us_566bc51be4b0fccee16ec083 (accessed 16 February 2016)

whether China Search links search results to overseas sources, one may find out how it safeguards cyber sovereignty by securing China's Internet border. Table 15 and Table 16 show that both China Search and Baidu predominately fed information from websites within China, regardless of the sensitiveness of the keyword enquired. Only one link of an item on each search engine, 'Li Peng Family' and 'Grass Mud Horse' belonged to foreign websites, i.e not controlled by the Chinese government.

Table 15. How Many Links To Websites Outside China? (sensitive keywords)

Keywords Queried	Chinaso.com			Baidu.com		
	Number Of Links To Websites Outside China	Total Number Of Results	%	Number Of Links To Websites Outside China	Total Number Of Results	%
Falun Gong	-	-	-	0	10	0%
June Fourth Incident	-	-	-	0	10	0%
Liu Xiaobo	-	-	-	0	10	0%
Princelings	-	-	-	0	10	0%
Chen Guangcheng	0	11	0%	0	10	0%
VPN	0	15	0%	0	10	0%
Li Peng Family	1	15	6.7%	0	10	0%
Wen Jiabao Family	0	10	0%	0	10	0%
Xi Jinping Family	0	15	0%	0	10	0%
Total/Average	1	66	0.2%	0	90	0%

Table 15: How Many Links To Websites Outside China? (sensitive keywords)

When Internet users make a query on Google, Bing, Yahoo, or other search engines operated by Western companies, the search results returned are not necessarily restricted to websites from where the netizen is located, or where the search engine server is based. Enter a query of Xi Jinping (in Chinese language) on Google for example, and the search results displayed contain websites from a wide range of backgrounds. They include media that are critical to China (Voice of America and Radio Free Asia), websites belonging to Falun Gong (the Epoch Times and NTD TV) which have been banned in China, media that are considered impartial (the BBC and Wikipedia), as well as China's state media, Xinhua and the *People's Daily*.

Among 20 keywords queried on China Search, only one search result regarding 'Li Peng Family' linked to an overseas website. Whereas most of the search results linking to this topic were from the state media,

including CCTV, the *People's Daily*, *Guangming Daily*, and *Economic Daily*, there was one news article that did not come from Chinese media but from a Singaporean newspaper, *Lianhe Zaobao* (*United Morning Post*), which reported that the CCP's Central Committee on Discipline and Inspection released a list of state-owned enterprises, including electricity companies, that were investigated for alleged corruption, while Li Peng and his family had been enjoying a monopoly on China's electricity industry for years.

Table 16. How Many Links To Websites Outside China? (less-sensitive keywords)

Keywords Queried	Chinaso.com			Baidu.com		
	Number Of Links To Websites Outside China	Total Number Of Results	%	Number Of Links To Websites Outside China	Total Number Of Results	%
Dalai Lama	0	10	0%	0	14	0%
Grass Mud Horse	0	11	0%	1	14	7%
Uyghur Independence	0	11	0%	0	12	0%
Occupying Central	0	12	0%	0	12	0%
Central Propaganda Department	-	-	-	0	12	0%
Diaoyu Islands	-	-	-	0	14	0%
CCP	0	12	0%	0	14	0%
South China Sea	0	11	0%	0	14	0%
Taiwan Independence	0	10	0%	0	16	0%
Activist Lawyer	0	10	0%	0	16	0%
China Human Rights	0	12	0%	0	14	0%
Total/Average	0	99	0%	1	160	0.6%

Table 16: How Many Links To Websites Outside China? (less-sensitive keywords)

One should note that unlike the BBC Chinese or the *New York Times* Chinese edition, which are banned in China, *Lianhe Zaobao* is widely available in China. The implication of including *Lianhe Zaobao's* article into the government search engine (this item was not found on Baidu) is significant for the following reason. As Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign continues to push forward, more and more senior party

leaders became involved, and the CCP sometimes use foreign media to release key information. In this case, the party-state might use the Singaporean paper as the tool and China Search as the platform to signal that Li Peng and his family could be the next target.

As for Baidu, among 20 keywords queried, the only search result that linked to an overseas website was regarding 'Grass Mud Horse,' which included an item from the Chinese language edition of Wikipedia. Explaining the meaning of this fictional animal, it mentions that Grass Mud Horse is a 'de facto mascot of netizens in China fighting for free expression...'⁶⁴⁹ It was unusual to see this encyclopaedia page among Baidu's search results as Wikipedia is, most of the time, blocked in China. Findings in Table 4 and Table 4.1 suggest that search engine users in China do not have many opportunities to access information from abroad. In other words, the Chinese government tries to block information from outside through its search engine, and to feed information that it can control—safeguarding its cyber sovereignty.

7.8. Limitations of State-Sponsored Search Engines

The effectiveness of state-sponsored search engines is greatly restricted for several reasons which will be explained in the following section. The propaganda system is far from monolithic, and the lack of central planning in regards to search engine policy can be partly attributed to the complexity of media administration structures. Goso/ Jike, Panguso, and CCTV Search were founded by the *People's Daily*, Xinhua News Agency and CCTV respectively. Although top CCP leaders and the Central Propaganda Department are in charge of all media organs, each individual media institution is controlled directly by the apparatus it is affiliated to. For instance, the *People's Daily* is the mouthpiece of the CCP Central Committee, Xinhua News Agency is under the administration of the State Council, and CCTV belongs to the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT). While fulfilling their duty to advocate party ideology and policies, state media also compete between themselves for resources, influence, and political status due to the commercialization of the media market since the 1980s.⁶⁵⁰

When discussing the competing interests among these media outlets, one should not lose sight of the larger picture of current events involving them as actors. The competition between the various organisations actually begins with the 'go global' policy that aims to enhance China's soft power. In his work report to the 17th National Congress of the CCP in 2007, President Hu Jintao suggested that China must 'enhance the country's cultural soft power.'⁶⁵¹ In 2009, Wang Chen, minister in charge of the CCP External Propaganda Office and of the State Council's Information Office, called on media organisations to set up influential and globe-spanning national media. Wang argued that 'an international communication capability is an important tool for building the image of the country and a reflection of China's soft power.'⁶⁵² A commentary signed by the *People's Daily* argued that 'disseminating Chinese

649 Wikipedia. 'Cao Ni Ma'. <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/草泥马> (accessed 15 November 2015)

650 For a brief account of the impact and implication of commercialisation on China's media, see Zhao (1998).

651 Xinhua Net. 2007. 'Full Text of Hu Jintao's Report to the 17th Party Congress', 24 October. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-10/24/content_6938749.htm (accessed 18 February 2014)

culture into the world is a key part of raising China's 'cultural soft power,' therefore making it necessary to develop 'a media system with international exposure.'⁶⁵³

Although the SARFT launched the 'Go Global Project' as early as 2001 to encourage media outlets to expand overseas, the media channels involved were limited to television, radio, and film industries, which are under the direct supervision of the SARFT.⁶⁵⁴ It was not until 2009 that there was a surge of top-level state media across different platforms—CCTV, Xinhua News Agency, the People's Daily, China Daily, and China Radio International—adopting the 'go global' strategy and actively expanding their services overseas. It was around the same time that CCTV, Xinhua, and the People's Daily started to build their own search engines.

An investigative report published by Xinhua regarding the 'go global' policy concluded that official media act individually while conducting propaganda, and fail to collaborate with each other by sharing staff, capital, and news sources, which results in a waste of resources.⁶⁵⁵ It is unlikely that the state media management will not realise the disadvantage of rapid expansion without proper coordination, and the reason behind media's fever in 'going global' may not necessarily have to do with enhancing China's 'soft power,' but with competition among other state media for resources, status, and domestic influence.⁶⁵⁶ One can see a similar situation regarding the development of search engines. A former employee at the propaganda department of the Communist Youth League in Beijing said to me that 'Leaders in state media organisations are more concerned about how to secure funding. Launching new services, let it be by opening new branches overseas or setting up search engines, provide golden opportunities to receive more resources from the top, thus making it likely that the projects would enhance his or her political status.'⁶⁵⁷

The CCP's central leadership considers search engines as an important tool in promoting China's soft power building.⁶⁵⁸ However, their effectiveness has been undermined by the lack of comprehensive, well-coordinated, coherent, and strategic planning from the top-levels of the state administration. Glaser and Murphy (2009) also observe that there has been no coordination among ministries or agencies in charge of carrying out 'soft power' policies, and no central leading group or leader has been assigned to oversee their promotion. A task force from Xinhua News Agency conducted a study on the efficacy of external propaganda policies and found that there was no coordination and communication between the top-level

652Xinhua Net. 2009. 'China's media to go global.' November 27. http://china.org.cn/china/2009-11/27/content_18964471.htm (accessed 8 March 2014)

653*People's Daily Online*. 2010. 'How to improve China's soft power?' March 11. <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/90785/6916487.html> (accessed 8 March 2014)

654SARFT was restructured and renamed as the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) in March 2013.

655Xinhua Net. 2005. 'Main issues concerning external propaganda.' June 24. *China Journalist*. Available on: <http://www.woxie.com/article/list.asp?id=20466> (accessed on 5 March 2014)

656Central China Science and Technology University. 2011. 'Guo Zhenzhi: how can China's television 'go global'.' December 20. <http://news.hustonline.net/html/2011-12-20/81762.shtml> (accessed 1 March 2014)

657Interview with a former employee at the propaganda department of the Communist Youth League in Beijing. 13 August 2014. Beijing, China.

658 Sina News. 2011. 'Xinhua she zhongyidong lianhe tuichu pangu sousuo (Xinhua News Agency and China Mobile launches Pangu Sousuo).' 22 February. <http://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2011-02-22/15175203870.shtml> (accessed 1 March 2014)

state media including the CCTV, China Daily, China News Agency, CRI, the *People's Daily* (overseas edition), and Xinhua.⁶⁵⁹

Besides suffering from competing interests between the *People's Daily*, Xinhua and CCTV, as well as from a lack of coherent strategy, another factor that hampers the success of these search engines is the ambiguity of their business model. In each case, it is unclear whether they follow the party line or market rules. Firstly, state-sponsored search engines express conflicting messages when positioning themselves in the market. Goso/ Jike are dedicated to building the image of China, as well as to guiding public opinion.⁶⁶⁰ Commenting on Baidu, the general manager of Goso/ Jike, Deng Yaping emphasised that 'We represent the state, the key thing is not making a profit but carrying our duty for the country. You [Baidu] don't have to beat us, instead, you should help us and give us advice.'⁶⁶¹ Meanwhile, Jike's chief scientist admitted that, as a commercial company, the organisation naturally has to make a profit. But he pointed out that a search engine is a long term investment, therefore it takes time to turn one into a profitable business model.⁶⁶² The chief executive officer of Panguso, Wang Hongyu, made it clear that their business model is 'absolutely' profit-orientated, and they do not follow only a politically strategic move.⁶⁶³

Following the merger of Jike and Panguso, China Search expanded its products and sub-indexes in order to match its commercial counterpart. China's commercial websites are full of tabloid news and images of scantily clothed ladies, which proved to be popular among netizens. Aiming to increase its own popularity, China Search followed suit and adopted the same strategy in terms of content displayed. The picture below is a screen capture of the 'Society' page of China Search which consists of stories of the 'secret life of legs model,' 'sex therapist,' 'S&M hotel in Japan,' and 'oversized model.'⁶⁶⁴ Selling sex images and news may make the website more appealing to netizens, but it could also undermine the authority of China Search as a state search engine.

Secondly, the fact that a search engine is founded by state media inevitably makes people skeptical about its neutrality, especially in regards to political issues. Jike's chief scientist pointed out that their search engine should include 'correct information' in search results instead of those that will 'mislead netizens'.⁶⁶⁵ The chief technology officer of Xinhua Net revealed that Xinhua Search (the predecessor of Panguso) filtered data in order to block 'harmful and undesirable information' and to ensure that content in

⁶⁵⁹Xinhua. 2005. 'Main issues concerning external propaganda.' June 24. *China Journalist*. Available on: <http://www.woxie.com/article/list.asp?id=20466> (accessed 4 March 2012)

⁶⁶⁰About Us. Jike.com. The website no longer active. Available via Wayback Machine at <http://web.archive.org/web/20130825140452/http://about.jike.com/aboutus.html> (accessed 4 April 2015)

⁶⁶¹China Daily. 2014. 'Deng Yaping baiguang 20 yi beizhi bukaopu (Deng Yaping loses 20 yi is believed to be unfounded).' 11 December. http://hb.chinadaily.com.cn/2014/1211/25/21070_3.html

⁶⁶²PEdaily. 2012. 'Renmin sousuo zhifuqi: buju yidong huliangwang huoyinru zhanlue touzifang (People's search prepares for mobile search or attracting strategic investors).' 20 June. http://news.pedaily.cn/201206/20120620328937_all.shtml (accessed 24 April 2014)

⁶⁶³Pconline. 2012. 'Chaoyue baidu! Panguso dingwei guojiaji sousuo yinqing (Surpasses Baidu! Pangu search positions itself as national search engine).' 21 June.

<http://www.pconline.com.cn/pcedu/softnews/yejie/1206/2834901.html> (accessed 6 October 2013)

⁶⁶⁴China Search. Society Index Page. <http://society.chinaso.com/sqdq/index.html> (accessed 20 November 2015)

⁶⁶⁵*People's Daily Online*. 2011. 'Renmin sousuo bianlian Jike sousuo (People's search changes face into Jike search).' 21 June. <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/40728/14954134.html> (accessed 20 November 2013)

their results was 'safe and healthy.'⁶⁶⁶ This traditional role of gatekeeping and of presenting only 'respectable' data may prevent state search engines from freely competing with their commercial rivals.

<p>狗女子</p>  <p>通过监控，温先生发现爱犬去和一只泰迪“幽会”，结果却被泰迪的女主人给抱走了。11日，温先生与泰迪...</p>	<p>腿模的私密生活：私房拍摄轻松赚10万</p>  <p>做腿模的基本条件是：小腿与大腿比例接近相等或略长于大腿，腿型粗细均匀、线条优美、细腻、光洁、无明...</p>
<p>实拍日本情趣旅馆：女人享受被虐不为赚钱</p>  <p>最初的拍摄始于上世纪 90年代，花了两年时间拍摄纽约的 Carlton Arms Hotel，作为纽约地下文化的杰...</p>	<p>夜晚银行取钱遇上打劫的 男子打倒劫匪后打印凭条</p>  <p>李君刚刚从取钞口将钱拿出，条纹衬衫男就上前抢钱。李君当即挡开男子的手，迅速将钱放进裤包里，向条...</p>
<p>大码名模风韵动人 盘点走红的另类模特</p>  <p>体重达到91kg的美国模特阿什利（Ashley Graham）因为诸多品牌拍摄加大号内衣而出名。近日，她又拍摄</p>	<p>全球最开放职业：性医师裸家政无奇不有</p>  <p>美女经济渗透到生活的方方面面，无处不在。令</p>

Illustration 12: Screenshot of China Search Society Index Page

If a netizen wants to understand the government's position on a topic, he or she has to access official news websites such as Xinhua, the People's Daily, or China Search. The vice president of China Search once said that, with backing from the state, 'news items' were the main focus of their content building in

⁶⁶⁶Guangzhou Daily. 2010. 'Yangshi sousuo zheng chuyu ceshi jieduan (CCTV Search is testing beta version),' 20 January. Available at <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/40606/10801271.html> (accessed 10 October 2013)

the initial stages.⁶⁶⁷ As we saw in Table 2 and Table 3 in the previous section, China Search link most of its search results to official sources, or to its own sister websites. Although this is a way to feed Internet users only government-approved messages, it may also turn away potential users. A former software engineer at Baidu who was not aware of the existence of China Search until I interviewed him told me that 'The setting up of search engines by the state is a bad idea doomed to fail. It is expected that all information (on China Search) will be heavily filtered which inevitably restricts the variety of search results. When netizens cannot find what they could easily get on Baidu, they will turn their back on China Search.'⁶⁶⁸

Thirdly, China's search engine market is highly competitive, which makes it difficult for newcomers to establish their foothold. Search engines backed by the Chinese government were entering the market just as Google China was pulling out in 2010 because of censorship and intrusions from hackers. Baidu had a 73% share of China's Internet search market at that time, while Google secured a second place with 22%.⁶⁶⁹ The pulling out of Google left a vacuum in the search engine market. Panguso from Xinhua aims to surpass Baidu to become the number one search engine in China, and one of the leading search engines in the world.⁶⁷⁰ CCTV acknowledges that moving into Internet business poses both an opportunity and a challenge for state-owned media, as it is a fully open but highly competitive area.⁶⁷¹ Despite the efforts made by Xinhua and the *People's Daily*, the top search engine market in China is still dominated by commercial companies. Baidu topped the market share in 2013 with 63%, followed by Qihoo's 360 with 18%. Sogou ranked third with 10%.⁶⁷²

Although Western search engines ranked fourth to sixth, their market shares, with Google at 2.88%, Bing at 0.57%, and Yahoo's 0.48% were no match for their Chinese rivals.⁶⁷³ The market shares of Jike and Panguso were so small that they were not even registered in the statistics.⁶⁷⁴ Even after merging Jike and Panguso to launch China Search, the latter's performance is still questionable. According to Alexa, a company that provides web traffic data and analytics, although being the only official state-sponsored search engine, traffic to China Search ranked only 104 in China and 754 in the world in 2015.⁶⁷⁵ By comparison, Baidu ranks number one in China and 4 in the world.⁶⁷⁶ In fact, state-backed search engines are little known in China. The former Baidu engineer I interviewed is not the only one who never heard of China Search. So is the case of a former employee at the propaganda department of the Communist

667Cyberspace Administration of China. 2015. 'Zhongguo sousuo rijun fangwenlang dafu tisheng (China Search daily visit soars),' 6 May. http://www.cac.gov.cn/2015-05/06/c_1115189064.htm (accessed 12 December 2015)

668Interview with a former software engineer at Baidu. 10 August 2014. Beijing, China.

669*China Daily*. 2010. 'Goso goes for share of China's search market'. 21 December.

http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2010-12/21/content_11734869.htm (accessed 10 March 2014)

670About Us. Panguso.com.

671Loretta Chao. 2011. 'China Media Push Into the Web,' *Wall Street Journal*, 8 March.

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703386704576186402009111630> (accessed 6 October 2013)

672China Internet Watch. 2013. 'Baidu Search Share Down While Qihoo 360 Up in August 2013.' 17 September. <http://www.chinainternetwatch.com/3809/china-search-engine-market-share-update-august-2013/#ixzz3ZfQ0UzcO> (accessed 6 October 2013)

673Ibid.

674Ibid.

675Alexa. Site Overview of Chinaso.com. <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/chinaso.com> (accessed 19 November 2015)

676Alexa. Site Overview of Baidu.com. <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/baidu.com> (accessed 19 November 2015)

Youth League in Beijing, who only had a brief look at Jike, the predecessor of China Search. To put things in perspective, the former head of Jike, Deng Yaping, used to be the general secretary of the Communist Youth League in Beijing.⁶⁷⁷

Perhaps realising that China Search could not compete with Baidu head on, the two reached a comprehensive strategic cooperation framework agreement in November 2014.⁶⁷⁸ Guided by the strategy of building an Internet power (*wangluo qianguo*), the goal of the cooperation is the construction of online news big data, and e-governance search.⁶⁷⁹ The CEO of Baidu pointed out that 'Baidu has an advantage in understanding the netizen's needs for government information, as well as for processing data. Meanwhile, China Search is good at collecting, analysing, and using government information.'⁶⁸⁰ According to the deputy director of the Internet Information Office, China Search would seek support from Baidu on technical issues, while the latter would rely on the state-backed search engine for government information and public services.⁶⁸¹ Although official news reports from the state media emphasised that this is a win-win situation, it remains unclear who initiated the cooperation. Given the almost negligible market share of China Search, it is the party more likely to gain from this collaboration. Furthermore, with China Search's state-sponsored background, Baidu has little option but to agree to the cooperation, if it was proposed by the party-state. As I have discussed earlier, China Search was the product of the painful restructuring of several failed state-backed search engines. The latest cooperation with a commercial search engine casts new doubt on the survivability of its business model as a state-driven force in the online world.

7.9. Conclusion

State-sponsored search engines, along with Internet commentators (examined in chapter three), are representations of the party-state's Internet strategies that show they are adaptive and innovative in nature, particularly when compared with the old-style censorship methods. In addition to imposing strict censorship on commercial search engines, the party-state also launched its own engine, which aims to channel the information flow, spread pro-government messages, and direct public opinion.

The Chinese government is not the only, nor the first government to attempt to develop its own search engine. France, Germany, and Japan all tried and failed. However, Iran and Russia managed to develop

⁶⁷⁷Interview with a former employee at the propaganda department of the Communist Youth League in Beijing. 13 August 2014. Beijing, China.

⁶⁷⁸China News. 2014. 'Baidu xieshou guosou jiakuai bianmin zhengwu sousuo (Baidu join hands with china search speeding up the construction of searching service),' 26 November. <http://www.chinanews.com/it/2014/11-26/6816119.shtml> (accessed 27 December 2015)

⁶⁷⁹Ibid.

⁶⁸⁰China Daily. 2014. 'Baidu zhongguo sousuo quanmian zhanlue hezuo (Baidu and china search launch comprehensive strategic cooperation),' 25 November. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/interface/toutiao/1138561/cd_18976028.html (accessed 27 December 2015)

⁶⁸¹Cyber China. 2014. 'Zhongguo sousuo baidu lianen, bushi yiban de hunpei jiaqu (the marriage between China Search and Baidu is no ordinary marriage),' 25 November. <http://www.cyberchina.org/2014/11/25/3908.html> (accessed 27 December 2015)

their state-backed search engines to counterbalance Western influence, from Google in particular. The CCP has adopted innovative propaganda strategies in tandem with the development of the Internet. Looking for information via search engines is the third most popular online activity among Chinese netizens. Introducing state-sponsored search engines to filter out undesirable information and to feed official messages to the public thus becomes another strategy to direct public opinion.

The importance of utilising search engines as a tool to enhance China's soft power was elevated to a strategic level by the CCP in 2009. The plan to build a state-sponsored search engine was formulated in 2010, after the withdrawal of Google from China. Within a year, three of the top-level state media had all launched their own search engine: i) CCTV Search by CCTV, ii) Goso by the People's Daily, later rebranded as Jike, and iii) Panguso by Xinhua. Despite being backed by the state, they achieved very little as the top search engines in China are still dominated by commercial ones. Baidu led the charts in terms of market share in 2013 with 63%, followed by Qihoo's 360 with 18%, and Sogou with 10%.⁶⁸² The market shares of Jike and Panguso were so small that they were not even registered in the statistics.⁶⁸³ Jike and Panguso were eventually merged into one entity, China Search, whereas CCTV Search limits itself to providing search services on the CCTV website uniquely.

While state-backed search engines struggle to survive, the role they can play has gone beyond censorship and propaganda. The party-state introduced the idea of building China into a powerful Internet nation, in which search engines have the most important part in achieving this goal. In addition, the development of a state-backed search engine may also help to defend cyber sovereignty and to maintain Cybersecurity Law. Within the span of just four years we saw the rapid expansion and reconstruction of several state-sponsored search engines. There are shortcomings in two areas which contribute to their failure. From a structural perspective, the propaganda system is far from monolithic, and state media compete between themselves for resources, influence, and political status. Furthermore, the lack of well-coordinated, coherent, and strategic planning from the top-levels undermines the effectiveness of state search engines. From a business perspective, state-sponsored search engines are uncertain when it comes to deciding between following the party line or market rules. Secondly, people are skeptical about the neutrality of state search engines, which reduces their prospects to attract users and money from advertising. Thirdly, China's search engine market is highly competitive and dominated by Baidu, which makes it difficult for newcomers to establish foothold.

Nevertheless, the Chinese party-state have not given up on the idea of using search engines as a tool to safeguard cyber sovereignty. This is evidenced by the continuous rebranding of the search engines developed by the *People's Daily*, from People's Search to Goso and then Jike, to the eventual merger of Jike and Xinhua's Panguso, followed by the re-launch of China Search. As the only official national search engine, China Search has a mandate to spread China's voice and to improve online services for the party and the state. My research found that China Search: 1) helps to maintain Cybersecurity Law by filtering information perceived to be 'harmful' and 'unlawful'; 2) 89% of sensitive keywords and 70% of

682 □ China Internet Watch. 2013. 'Baidu Search Share Down While Qihoo 360 Up in August 2013.' 17 September. <http://www.chinainternetwork.com/3809/china-search-engine-market-share-update-august-2013/#ixzz3ZfQ0UzcO> (accessed 6 October 2013)

683 Ibid.

less-sensitive keywords returned results from government sources. This suggests that the party-state makes a significant effort to feed users information from government-approved websites; 3) attempts to reinforce government messages by including its own content in search results, even though the proportion is much lower than external links (27% to 32%). Findings from 2) and 3) indicate that China Search could contribute to cultivating a favourable Internet environment for the building of a powerful Internet nation; and 4) does not link to websites outside China. In other words, China Search keeps the information that it displays under the party-state's control—safeguarding China's cyber sovereignty.

In the previous chapters, I suggested that e-government, online message boards and weibo offer new platforms that promote the interaction between state and society. In the case of search engines, although they provide netizens with a window to access the vast amount of information available in cyberspace, they can also be used by the Chinese government as a tool to channel favourable information to netizens, with or without their consent. By comparing search results on China Search and Baidu, I found four main characteristics regarding China Search. Firstly, it makes it clear that its results are censored. Secondly, it imposes a much stricter filter and channels more official information than similar commercial websites. Thirdly, it does not allow netizens to access information that is not control by the Chinese government. Fourthly, it attempts to reinforce official messages by linking results to content prepared by websites of China Search itself.

To some extent, pursuing Internet power and defending its sovereignty on the Internet by forcing out western players while promoting China's own commercial and state players is an effort by the CCP to achieve 'self-reliance'. By combining the tactics of blocking undesirable information and feeding approved messages through search results on China Search, the party-state aims to manipulate the information available on its official search engine and to cultivate an online discourse favourable to the state. In fact, the state-sponsored search engine has gone beyond its traditional role as a propaganda tool to play a role in helping China to develop as an Internet power, to defend its cyber sovereignty and to maintain Cybersecurity Law and the Regulation on Internet Information Services. The extent to which this strategy can be successful on all accounts remains questionable. Not only requiring commercial search engines filtering search results, the Chinese authorities has taken a step further by building its own ensuring that all information available on the state-sponsored search engine are favorable to the state. That is a sign of 'authoritarian resilience 2.0'.

8. Chapter Eight: Conclusion

China tops many world records. With 731 million Internet users, it has the largest Internet population on the globe. With over 88 million members, the Chinese Communist Party is the world's largest political party. In power since 1949, the CCP is one of the longest ruling parties in the world. Worth \$11 trillion, China's economy is the second largest after the US. In the meantime, China ranked 5th from the bottom on the World Press Freedom Index, beating Syria, Turkmenistan, Eritrea and North Korea. How to understand this complicated country and its political system is not an easy task. How can an authoritarian regime manage to rule the world's largest population, and achieve economic and technological development without a democratic political system?

For some China observers, one of most puzzling questions is how the party-state was able to rehabilitate its legitimacy after the Tiananmen Massacre in June 1989. Nathan (2003) suggests authoritarian resilience is the answer, according to which the CCP is able to enhance the capacity of the state to govern effectively through institutional adaptations and policy adjustments. The authoritarian resilience discourse was initially used to explain why the CCP survived the 1990s' political turmoil, this approach remains an area of interest among scholars in the 21st century. Is authoritarian resilience in China a passing phenomenon or a permanent feature? Is the authoritarian resilience theory still relevant in the Internet age?

The main research question of this thesis is: 'what is the role of the Internet in relation to authoritarian resilience in China?' I want to find out how the Chinese party-state utilises the Internet to help it stay in power. Pei (2012) suggests the capacity to adapt to new social and political challenges as one of the variable associated with authoritarian resilience. Whether the regime can adopt new policies that contribute to its longevity and power. This 'adapt and change' character can also be found in its Internet strategies. Although media is regarded as one of the factors in stabilizing authoritarian regimes in the authoritarian resilience discourse, how the CCP adopts different Internet strategies to its advantage has not been fully studied.

The early literature on Internet propaganda in China mainly focuses on censorship and the control of information. However, this is only one side of the coin. My thesis not only fills a gap in scholarship, but also provides a fresh angle in understanding the CCP. I argue that the party-state's approach towards the Internet is not only concerned with censorship and propaganda, but is also capable of adaptation and of making use of this technology in an innovative way to control the information flow. Through the examination of the authorities' adaptive Internet strategies, I aim to show that the party-state is not monolithic, but rather a sophisticated one. This thesis suggests that the CCP's strategies on the Internet keep evolving, from indoctrination to public opinion guidance, from censorship to e-governance, from an emphasis on the promotion of e-government to building an Internet power. All these demonstrate the regime's capability to adapt and change, the essence of authoritarian resilience, which I called, 'authoritarian resilience 2.0'.

The CCP's adapt and change strategies towards the Internet specifically contribute to the survival of the Communist regime. In order to mobilise public support and enhance legitimacy, the authorities is willing to introduce innovative propaganda strategies on the Internet in accordance with the changing media environment in the age of the Internet. I identified five major adaptive strategies employed by the party-state: i) deploying Internet commentators; ii) setting up government Weibo accounts; iii) promoting e-government; iv) introducing government online message boards; and v) launching state-sponsored search engines.

8.1. Originality and Contribution

In terms of originality and my contribution to scholarship, each of the five Internet strategies examined in the five empirical chapters demonstrated the 'adapt and change' capability of the party-state in the age of the Internet. It sheds light on the understanding of the complexity of Chinese politics, and most important, revive the debate of authoritarian resilience in the context of the Internet age.

Nathan (2003) identifies input institutions as an important source of authoritarian resilience. China's censorship apparatus can be seen as one of the country's input institutions. In the era of 'authoritarian resilience 2.0', the party-state introduced Internet commentators, along with state-sponsored search engines, to go beyond old-fashion censorship with the aim to feed with pro-government information and to direct online public opinion in its favour. It is widely cited that Internet commentators receive 50 Chinese cents for each pro-government post, however none of the literature provides concrete evidence to prove it. My study, based on official documents collected from government sources, suggests that this is not reflective of reality. Government Internet commentators do not necessarily receive extra rewards for their work, with important implications for the significance of their support of the government. Monetary rewards are not the only incentive.

By examining government documents, I found that official Internet commentators are mostly government employees or party officials who were assigned to the task alongside their routine duty, instead of being ordinary citizens. This finding is indeed in line with research result of King et al (2017). In regards to rewards, Internet commentators do not necessarily receive 50 Chinese cents for every pro-government comment post. Their actual financial rewards range from 50 Chinese cents per post to 2,000 yuan per month. Meanwhile, Internet commentators have a clear workflow. The procedure runs as follows: monitor the Internet; collect information regarding public opinion; analyse a given situation; report to the superior; and take steps to guide or correct public opinion to match the government's policy.

Although Government departments are proud of the achievements of their Internet commentators, it is difficult to offer a comprehensive and objective assessment of their efficacy as they operate covertly. In the Tianjin explosion case, some of the commentators posted identical pro-government messages via different accounts. Both cases show signs that point to the work of Internet commentators. On President Xi's online message board, *Xi dada jiyayou*, 20% of the comments were repetitive, overwhelmingly glorifying Xi, and were left by anonymous users, which indicates that it might be the work of Internet

commentators. By examining how the party-state deploys Internet commentators as an adaptive method—or by manipulating online opinion without resorting to censorship, this chapter furthers our understanding of the regime's institutionalisation and longevity.

The CCP's 'adapt and change' capability keeps evolving along with the changing environment. The use of Internet commentators is one of the earliest adaptive Internet propaganda strategies introduced by the party-state to sway public opinion in the cyberspace. In fact, it is only the starting point of the CCP's adaptive approach in resilient authoritarianism. As Internet users shift their preferences to emerging social media, such as Weibo and WeChat, the CCP followed suit by setting up official accounts on these new platforms. This in itself supports my argument that the Chinese party-state's Internet propaganda strategies are highly adaptive.

As resilient authoritarianism, China's political system is capable of enhancing the state's capacity via institutional adaptations and policy adjustments. E-government, government Weibo, and government online message boards are all part of an *wangluo wenzheng* (e-governance) initiative that is structured to foster better interaction between the state and society. It shows the authorities' capability of adapt and change in accordance with ICT development in order to stay in power.

Partly due to the active promotion from the central government, 100% of departments and government offices at the central, provincial and municipal level, and over 80% at the county level had set up official websites. Portals of central and provincial governments serve as windows showcasing the work of the state. These portals offer the public a channel for e-consultation, e-participation, and e-scrutiny. While e-government focuses on delivering government services to the citizens, e-governance involves an element of interaction between the state and the public. In that respect, the functions of Chinese government portals have moved beyond propaganda, not only offering e-government services, but also e-governance.

By adapting Lollar's (2006) analytical framework, I assessed the e-government performance of all 31 provincial government portals and the central government portal. Comparing my study with Lollar's (2006) research, the most significant finding is that the functions and e-services provided by provincial government portals in 2014 were much more comprehensive and sophisticated than in 2006. At the same time, e-government developments of the central government portal (gov.cn) in the past decade are far less dramatic than provincial ones. Gov.cn in 2015 scored 0% in terms of transparency and openness. Information regarding 'Bidding Information,' 'Government Procurement,' and the 'Grievance Box' that were available in 2005 on the central government portal site disappeared in 2015. These backward developments suggests that on the one hand, the party-state wants to promote e-government through portals, on the other hand, it is uneasy for releasing too much 'secrets' online. Bidding and government procurements are some of the hotbeds of bribery and corruption.

Meanwhile, my study found that there has been significant progress in the development of e-government resources on provincial portals in the past decade, but progress made by the central government portal site is less obvious. Of the four main categories examined on gov.cn, only one saw improvement in the

last decade while the other two remain unchanged. Although the majority of provincial portals in my study provide channels to engage the netizens, the apparent willingness of the officialdom to reach out to the public can be merely a gesture. e-participation highly depends on strong political commitment, collaborative leadership, vision and appropriate institutional frameworks that ensure structured ways of engaging people, and guarantee that inputs provided become a meaningful part of the policy-making process.

Although we saw notable progress in the quality and service offering of government portals in the past few years, and of provincial ones in particular, e-government development in China is not without issues. The performance of government websites was considered unsatisfactory by the party-state itself. An assessment on Chinese government websites carried out by the State Council gave 50.90 out of 100 points for the overall performance of all government websites, provincial government portals scored 53.64, and central departments scored 48.25. The State Council also shows that government portals were particularly poor in making good use of social media, providing mobile phone capabilities and versions in other languages. The findings in that report are in line with my study, in which I found that provincial portals outperformed the central government's website, and not many portals make use of social media and provide versions designed for mobile access.

Regardless of the shortcomings mentioned above, government portals are an important element of e-government that may enhance the state image and mobilise public support by providing useful information, offering better e-services, and by engaging and interacting more with the public. These functions are indeed the same as those comprising e-governance (*wangluo wenzheng*), that the CCP has been promoting. The government portals studied in this thesis demonstrate the authorities' willingness to make good use of ICT to advance its agenda. In the next two chapters, I will examine other two adaptive Internet strategies—government Weibo and online message boards—to illustrate the party-state's capability to adapt and change in accordance with the ICT development.

As I pointed out in the chapter on Internet commentators, the party-state shifts its attention along with the development of new online platforms. Given the huge potential of Weibo, the Chinese authorities moved in by means of controlling it, as well as by making use of it. The nationwide crackdown on Weibo celebrities in the summer of 2013 was concomitant with the promotion of government Weibo, serving as a classic example of 'carrot and stick' approach.

The case studies examined in the Weibo chapter demonstrate that the party-state can gain from the promotion of government Weibo if managed properly and skilfully. The advocacy of *wangluo wenzheng*, and subsequently of *Weibo wenzheng*, demonstrates that the CCP goes beyond propaganda by using Weibo as a tool for public opinion guidance. It also shows a human side of party officials, and the ability of e-government to provide better governance. The party and government departments across China use Weibo to serve the people by providing information, engaging and interacting with the public, solving public relation crises, handling negative news, and refuting rumours.

The 'photoshopped incident' in Huili demonstrates how Weibo can be used to solve public relations crises. Officials in Huili county, Sichuan province, turned an embarrassing scandal into a tourism marketing opportunity to promote this remote county. The cases of Li Wenrong, mayor of Kunming, and Wu Hao, director of the Propaganda Department in Honghe, Yunnan province, suggest that Weibo accounts set up by individual officials can be influential and, if managed properly, improve the state's image. The management of the effects of unexpected rainstorm in Beijing illustrates how the government could provide services to residents, and the significance of cooperation between the state and netizens through Weibo. The director of the Ministry of Public Security's Anti-Abduction Office, Chen Shiqu, made good use of Weibo as a platform for netizens and government to coordinate and cooperate in the fight against child abduction.

Interestingly, although Xi Jinping keeps asking officials and government departments to make good use of social media, he himself does not have an official Weibo or WeChat account. After posting his first Weibo post in December 2015, he hasn't appeared again on Weibo. There could be two possible reasons. The first is the secretive nature of communications surrounding top CCP leaders, according to which their personal lives are considered taboo. In fact, none of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee members own an official Weibo account. The second explanation is that the authorities might have found it too difficult to cope with the overwhelming scale of responses from netizens. Xi's Weibo post attracted more than 48,000 comments within a day, many of them asking sensitive questions about topics such as air pollution.

There is a lack of central planning and standardised procedures regarding the proper set up and management of government Weibo accounts across the country. The quality standards of government microblogs vary greatly. My findings echo Renz and Sullivan's (2013) study on Russian regional governors' use of Twitter. To some officials, the real motivation for using social media is the gain of personal fame or influence, instead of the interaction with the public. Having said this, the role of Weibo becomes more and more important and visible in mobilising public support, guiding public opinion in the government's favour, and in improving the CCP's legitimacy.

Compared with other adaptive Internet strategies studied in this thesis, Weibo is arguably the most interactive platform whose success relies on the participation of the netizens. As WeChat is gaining popularity, the significance of Weibo as the main social-media platform has declined in recent years. Nevertheless, the number of active monthly users on Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo have still been increasing day by day. In addition to imposing censorship on Weibo, the authorities has proven that it is adaptive in make good use of this social media. This suggests that the CCP's propaganda strategy has moved beyond the old-style propaganda methods, towards *wangluo wenzhang* (e-governance).

One of the goals of e-governance is to promote interaction between netizens and officials, government Weibo, e-government, and online message boards could all serve this purpose. Although Chinese government portals do provide certain interactive services, these are not their main features. Although Weibo is an effective platform to facilitate interaction, the Chinese government does not own Weibo. Only government message boards hosted by state media or the central government portal are, entirely

dedicated to the interaction between the state and netizens. The use of government online message boards as a tool for e-governance has yet to be studied systematically. Current Chinese language literature only covers the Message Board for Local Leaders, while four other state-led boards are overlooked. To the best of my knowledge, a comparative study of all government online message boards has not been conducted in the past, with mine as the first approach.

Since 2006, the party-state has launched five online message boards dedicated to the communication between netizens and senior officials from different departments in the CCP and the government. Of the five message boards, only two, Message Board for Local Leaders and Message Board for the Premier are institutionalised as an interactive platform for the state and society. As the cases studied in this thesis indicated, their interactive features can benefit both public and state in many ways. Firstly, they can serve as a feedback mechanism for the public to report issues that the government neglected or overlooked. Secondly, they provide a platform for the public to express their opinions and to make suggestions. Thirdly, they may help to solve citizens' personal issues, which in return improves the state-society relationship and enhances the party-state's image.

My research found that the contents being published on those these message boards are non-sensitive and do not challenge the fundamental ruling of the party-state. One may argue that the authorities cherry picking issues that can cultivate a positive image of the state in their responses. However, We we can not ignore the fact that those these government online message boards does provide a new platform for citizens to interact with the party-state. Prior to the Internet age, there were very limited channels for the public to communicate with the state. Together with government Weibo and e-government, message boards serve as the main three mechanisms of e-governance that promote a better state-society relationship. Their adoption also suggests that the CCP does not only use the Internet as a tool for propaganda or censorship, but is also willing to interact with the public through a variety of online channels.

The authorities not only imposes strict censorship on commercial search engines, but also launched its own engine in order to ensure that only government-approved information appears in search results. It indicates the party-state's willingness and capability to adapt and change in the face of new ICT. The thesis is the first comprehensive study of the development of China's state-sponsored search engines, including an empirical study of the latest search engine, China Search.

Not only requiring commercial search engines filtering search results, the Chinese authorities has taken a step further by building its own ensuring that all information available on the state-sponsored search engine are favourable to the state. As the only official national search engine, China Search has a mandate to 'spread China's voice' and to improve online services for the party and the state. My research found that China Search: 1) helps to maintain Cybersecurity Law by filtering information perceived to be 'harmful' and 'unlawful'; 2) 89% of sensitive keywords and 70% of less-sensitive keywords returned results from government sources. This suggests that the party-state makes a significant effort to feed users information from government-approved websites; 3) attempts to reinforce

government messages by including its own content in search results, even though the proportion is much lower than external links (27% to 32%).

By comparing search results on China Search and Baidu, I found four main characteristics regarding China Search. Firstly, it makes it clear that its results are censored. Secondly, it imposes a much stricter filter and channels more official information than similar commercial websites. Thirdly, it does not allow netizens to access information that is not control by the Chinese government. Fourthly, it attempts to reinforce official messages by linking results to content prepared by websites of China Search itself. It indicates that China Search could contribute to cultivating a favourable Internet environment for the authorities by feeding information approved by the state.

The effectiveness of state-sponsored search engines is greatly restricted for several reasons. Firstly, the propaganda system is far from monolithic, and the lack of central planning in regards to search engine policy can be partly attributed to the complexity of media administration structures. While fulfilling their duty to advocate party ideology and policies, state media also compete between themselves for resources, influence, and political status due to the commercialization of the media market since the 1980s. Another factor that hampers the success of these search engines is the ambiguity of their business model, it is unclear whether they follow the party line or market rules. Thirdly, the fact that a search engine is founded by state media inevitably makes people skeptical about its neutrality, especially in regards to political issues. Fourthly, China's search engine market is highly competitive, which makes it difficult for newcomers to establish their foothold.

In summary, the five empirical chapters demonstrate the complexity of the authorities' Internet strategies. Among the five strategies listed above, Weibo, online message boards, and e-government fall under the category of e-governance initiatives. They all serve as new platforms for the public to interact with the state, acting as a form of popular participation. Through these channels, the public can express their opinions, make suggestions, file their complaints, or expose government wrongdoing. Meanwhile, the state provide e-services, direct public opinion, and feed pro-government information via these platforms, in an effort that goes beyond propaganda. By comparison, Internet commentators and state-sponsored search engines are measures not designed for encouraging public participations, but they are adaptive methods, to control the information flow, feed pro-government messages, and direct public opinion.

We should remember that whatever one sees on Chinese Internet is approved by the authorities. Comments deemed too critical, sensitive or which may lead to collective action are banned. The party-state is ultimately the authority deciding what can be allowed on the Internet. Nevertheless, the five strategies identified indicate the party-state's willingness and capability to adapt and change in the face of a new media environment.

My thesis aims to provide a new dimension in understanding China's sophisticated and adaptive Internet strategies. By examining how the CCP introduces the five Internet strategies in response to the changing media environment, I have, hopefully, achieved the following three objectives: i) bring the research on China's resilient authoritarianism up to date by applying the theory to the Internet age; ii) demonstrate

the party-state's resilience; iii) show that the authoritarian resilience theory is valid in understanding China's politics under Xi.

In terms of the theoretical implications, this thesis broadens and deepens the debate, and provides a new perspective in the understanding of resilient authoritarianism, which I called 'authoritarian resilience 2.0'. There have been discussions in public fora on whether the CCP is on the brink of collapse, and some observers even proclaimed the inevitability of the fall of the CCP and the transition to democracy. With Xi starting his second five-year term as the party's General Secretary in October 2017, the question of the durability of the rule of the party is not only theoretically important, but also politically relevant. Can the party-state survive in the Internet age? In the era of 'authoritarian resilience 2.0', this adapt and change capability is best found in the regime's Internet strategies. By examining how the CCP makes good use of Internet technologies, this thesis suggests that the CCP can adapt to modernity. It may inspire a new approach of studying authoritarian resilience and perhaps a debate of 'authoritarian resilience 2.0'.

8.2. Limitations

One of the main critiques received from external examiners who assessed this thesis is the lack of a theoretical framework. In fact, each empirical chapter covers different Internet strategies, and each of them can draw on a variety of theoretical frameworks. In this corrected version, I propose to facilitate an understanding of the party-state from the authoritarian resilience perspective. This approach requires further development and debate in order to show that it is still valid and relevant.

The main methodology employed in my research is qualitative. This should be the preferred scholarly approach for most chapters due to the nature of the debate and my argument, including on Internet commentators, government Weibo and online message boards. However, when it comes to studying government portals or state-sponsored search engine, a quantitative approach might be more suitable. In addition, I did not use computer programs to collect data but did this manually, which means that the scale of samples is limited, especially when looking at sensitive keywords on state-sponsored search engines.

8.3. Future Research

A comprehensive study of Chinese authorities' Internet strategies cannot be complete without examining WeChat, a Chinese messaging app launched in 2011. Within six years, it has reached half a billion active monthly users in China and nearly one billion worldwide. Given that it is a very new social media platform, academic research on this topic is scarce compared with literature on Weibo or e-government. Some of the latest studies focused on how the authorities impose censorship on WeChat (Ruan 2016 et al and Ruan et al 2017). Based at the Citizen Lab of the University of Toronto, the researchers found that censorship on WeChat is dynamic and often reactive to news events in a timely manner. Assessing the

impact of WeChat on China's civil society, Tu (2016) suggests that WeChat has created new channels for the public to connect with each other and it even promotes online debate and popular protests.

As I demonstrated in the five empirical chapters, the party-state is highly capable of adapting new technology to its benefit. Its adaptive Internet strategies can also be found on this latest social media. Government accounts on WeChat have reached one hundred thousand in mid-2016, offering similar services as government Weibo. For instance, the WeChat account of the Shanghai government allows residents to make appointments for applying for residence permits, social security cards and marriage registration via its WeChat app. It has attracted 600 million visits since it set up the account in 2014.⁶⁸⁴ Since government WeChat only gained importance in very recent years, as I was completing data collection for my PhD thesis, it is not included in my empirical research. Further research on how the party-state makes good use of WeChat, in addition to censorship, is needed and indeed, the topic of my future research.

Mentioned briefly in this thesis, Russia and Iran have also been implementing adaptive Internet propaganda strategies such as state-sponsored search engines and the Russian troll army. In fact, the CCP's officials have urged Chinese and Russian media outlets to step up cooperation in using traditional and emerging media to promote national interests.⁶⁸⁵ A comparative study on how authorities in countries with limited press freedom go beyond old-fashioned censorship methods, and make use of ICT to promote state image, may shed light on innovative propaganda strategies. Based on my studies on government Weibo (and WeChat in the future), one can compare how governments in democratic systems, such as Taiwan, South Korea, UK or US use social media to engage the public. One can expect that elected politicians in democratic countries have more incentive to interact with their voters, but how about government apparatuses at the local level? For instance, how do county police bureaus in China, Taiwan and the UK make use of social media? Do they offer the same e-services?

The term 'propaganda' contains a negative connotation in the West, and is generally used in pairs such as 'Nazi propaganda'. The term is mostly employed in reference to countries with limited press freedom, including China, Russia, and Iran. When it comes to describing information control or the setting of a political agenda by Western governments, the terms being used are more neutral, such as political communication, strategic communications, or government PR. They are more or less the same as they refer to the promotion of government messages and their aim is to improve the state's image. In China, those setting the government agenda are called propagandists, while in the West, they are called spin doctors. In that sense, using ICT for political communications is not unique in China nor did it pioneer this practice.

However, in Western democracies, governments and officials are held accountable by the public and are under scrutiny by the fourth estate, therefore they need to engage citizens and provide e-services with

⁶⁸⁴Yang, Meiping. 2017. 'Government adds more functions to WeChat account,' Shanghai Daily, 18 July. <http://www.shanghaidaily.com/metro/public-services/Government-adds-more-functions-to-WeChat-account/shdaily.shtml> (accessed 19 July 2017)

⁶⁸⁵Xinhua News. 2017. 'Chinese official calls on strengthening China-Russia media cooperation,' 5 July. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-07/05/c_136417508.htm (accessed 20 July 2017)

the help of ICT. Whereas in China, with no independent media to check the ruling power and with no need to answer to constituents, what is the authorities' motivation? I argue that the Chinese party-state also needs to maintain legitimacy. By quickly adapting to new social and political challenges with the help of adaptive and innovative Internet strategies, the party-state demonstrates that it is resilient. This is what I called 'authoritarian resilience 2.0'.

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