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Abstract

How does journalism empower citizens through reporting and remembering news events, as they take shape in the era of social media in a society where the state power penetrates every aspect of social life and freedom of expression is not legally guaranteed? This inquiry is implemented through looking at the contemporary Chinese context, examining three sets of tensions that capture the characteristics of social media platforms: control/resistance, past/present, and global/local. It analyzes journalism and its reliance on collective memory in social media, by considering social media as an important venue where journalism interacts with other sets of discourses in a tradition of absolute state power. My study shows that in China, a society that enjoys a limited free flow of information, journalism uses social media platforms to mobilize symbolic resources for online activism targeting the Party-state system. These symbolic resources mainly derive from the past, both inside and beyond the Chinese context, leading to a debate of different versions of modernity in China.

This is a study that spans three years along with the development of Sina Weibo (now Weibo), a micro-blogging service provided by Sina.com, one of the major Chinese portal websites. I argue that social media complicate the landscape of journalism, by taking a balancing position between market interests and political safety. In particular, micro-blogging has blurred the conventional distinction between professional and citizen journalism. Instead, the institutional and personal journalistic practices are working together contest censorship via social media platforms. Social media opens up spaces for journalists and ordinary citizens to rewrite history, and to use various resources provided by the past to criticize the present Party-state system and struggle for journalistic freedom. The global-local exchange of news and memory via social media platforms brings about a new version of Chinese identity, competing with the version promoted by the Party-state in contemporary social transition, and urging a thorough political reform to reach the goal of a "civilized nation."

Social media, as shown in the case of Weibo, reflect the conflicting views of China's route to modernity--the debate between "Chinese characteristics" and "universal values," which produces the meanings of a modern Chinese nation and raises the relevance of citizenship. This conflict is situated in the complexities of historical and contemporary social transitions and China's dilemma in the embracing of a global world.

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MICRO-BLOGGING CONTESTING MODERNITIES: PRODUCING AND REMEMBERING
PUBLIC EVENTS IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Eileen Le Han

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MICRO-BLOGGING CONTESTING MODERNITIES

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To my parents

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ABSTRACT

MICRO-BLOGGING CONTESTING MODERNITIES: PRODUCING AND REMEMBERING PUBLIC EVENTS IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Le Han

Barbie Zelizer

How does journalism empower citizens through reporting and remembering news events, as they take shape in the era of social media in a society where the state power penetrates every aspect of social life and freedom of expression is not legally guaranteed? This inquiry is implemented through looking at the contemporary Chinese context, examining three sets of tensions that capture the characteristics of social media platforms: control/resistance, past/present, and global/local. It analyzes journalism and its reliance on collective memory in social media, by considering social media as an important venue where journalism interacts with other sets of discourses in a tradition of absolute state power. My study shows that in China, a society that enjoys a limited free flow of information, journalism uses social media platforms to mobilize symbolic resources for online activism targeting the Party-state system. These symbolic resources mainly derive from the past, both inside and beyond the Chinese context, leading to a debate of different versions of modernity in China.

This is a study that spans three years along with the development of Sina Weibo (now Weibo), a micro-blogging service provided by Sina.com, one of the major Chinese portal websites. I argue that social media complicate the landscape of journalism, by taking a balancing position between market interests and political safety. In particular, micro-blogging has blurred the conventional distinction between professional and citizen journalism. Instead, the institutional and personal journalistic practices are working together contest censorship via social media platforms. Social media opens up spaces for journalists and ordinary citizens to rewrite history, and to use various resources provided by the past to criticize the present Party-state system and struggle for journalistic freedom. The global-local exchange of news and memory via social media platforms brings about a new version of Chinese identity, competing with the version promoted by the Party-state in contemporary social transition, and urging a thorough political reform to reach the goal of a “civilized nation.”

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1. Introduction

On March 11, 2011, a 9.0-magnitude earthquake hit Japan, followed by a tsunami and a breakdown at the local nuclear power plant. This news spread immediately via various global media platforms. In China, shortly after the earthquake, extensive information updates erupted on Weibo, a Chinese micro-blog service similar to Twitter. These posts became the driving force of the media information relays in China about that earthquake.

Within this newly emerging social media platform of Weibo, the information flow displayed significant characteristics of journalistic practice. It invited an unusual mix of participants who had different levels of connection with the media institutions in China, including journalists dispatched to the earthquake-hit area, journalists residing in China and Japan, and ordinary social media users in China and Japan. The information updates involved extensive discussions of past and present events in China and worldwide, all related to the three kinds of disasters that Japan faced—the earthquake, the tsunami, and the nuclear crisis. These discussions intermingled the “now” and “then” aspects of these events, regardless of national boundary. In this process, there was a blending of local and global participation in the ensuing information flow. Participants included Chinese-speaking Weibo users from China, Japan, and other parts of the world, and their discussions extensively cited sources from both China and abroad.

In September 2013, a woman and her 13-year-old son in northeastern China became the focus of discussion on Weibo. Her husband, Xia Junfeng, a street vendor in a northeastern city, was sentenced to death in 2009, being convicted of the murder of two

“urban administrative” (Chengguan) officials who attacked him. Although citizens defended his actions as those of self-defense, after several rounds of appeals, his death sentence was upheld and he was executed in September 2013, and the entire process was not open to the public. The night before the execution, discussions on Weibo exploded. Xia’s wife Zhang Jing, who had been actively using Weibo to elicit support for her husband, tweeted on Weibo that she had a hard time attempting to see her husband for final words, and that the police denied her request to take a picture of him. At the same time, a huge number of Weibo users tweeted their support of her, mourned for her husband, and raised critical social issues, such as the injustice of the judicial system, which does not favor people on the bottom rungs of society, as well as the lack of transparency in China.

These scenarios point to the circumstances that prompted the writing of this dissertation. From news platforms featuring live and developing stories to a venue inviting citizen participation, social media platforms like Weibo become an important channel that raises critical issues of modernity.

This study raises the question of how journalism empowers citizens, by engaging different social groups in the reporting, sharing, and remembering of news events, taking shape in the era of social media in a society where the state power penetrates every aspect of social life and freedom of expression is not legally protected. I explore the answer to this question in the context of contemporary China, by considering social media as an important venue where journalism interacts with other sets of discourses in a tradition of absolute state power. My study shows that in China, a society that enjoys limited free

flow of information, journalism uses social media platforms to mobilize symbolic resources that derive from the past, both inside and outside the Chinese context, to mobilize citizen participation to contest the present Party-state power.

This introduction first situates my study against the background of China's search for modernity. Second, I explain the focus on journalism, its reliance on collective memory, and their invocation in the broader practice of online activism, considering each separately and together in the context of contemporary China. Third, I outline what drives this study, three sets of interrelated tensions—between control/resistance, past/present, and global/local impulses—that are prevalent in social media and have broader implications for the projects of modernity and journalism. It then concludes with some brief comments about the definitions of key terms and methodology employed in this study and offers an outline of the organization of this dissertation.

1.1. Journalism, collective memory and online activism in China's search for modernity

This study examines one social media site in China, Weibo (weibo.com), a micro-blogging service based in China for Chinese-speaking users worldwide. Launched in August 2009 and adopting features of existing global micro-blogging sites such as Twitter, Weibo is one of many services provided by sina.com, one of the major portals in China. Weibo users actively report and generate debates over news events locally and globally, with its participants ranging from individuals to organizations across the world, most of whose primary language is Chinese. The dynamics of Weibo, especially the flow of news within and outside its domain, reflects the dynamics of contemporary social

transition in China. The study of journalism, its reliance on collective memory and the ensuing opportunity for online activism is thus contextualized here as a platform that facilitates collective responses, including resistance, on the way to modernity in China.

On journalism, collective memory and online activism

In the Chinese context, journalism is at the frontier of social contention, directly facing the state power in many aspects of social life. There are also some taken-for-granted notions of journalism that need to be problematized in a society under transition, particularly at a moment in which journalism is adapting itself to these changing platforms. This study examines journalism as it takes shape in social media, the role played by collective memory in its shaping, and the potential for online activism in the search for modernity.

The potency of this intersection, and its relevance to Chinese modernity, comes clear when considering the interrelated nature of the practices under examination in this study. Journalism is connected to collective memory in many ways. Journalists have established cultural authority in interpreting the past and present through the involvement in the coverage and revisiting of news events (Zelizer, 1993; Schudson, 1992). It is also the past that produces meaning for the present news coverage (Edy, 1999). This study shows that journalism's engagement in past events through social media has the potential of adding to the meaning of the present, which enables critique and collective resistance of the present power structure when direct resistance and criticism are not permitted in any other way. Not only does this directly impact the potential for online activism but it also helps to shape responses to the tensions created by China's search for modernity.

The connection between collective memory and journalism is important in a society like China, where the official control of media and other channels of information has blocked access to alternative versions of public events. In China, many historical issues are still full of controversy and banned in public discourse. There are also many developing news events that are quickly fading from public attention due to the nature of new media as well as the intentional filtering of the state. In this type of society, there are thus double pressures of forced forgetting alongside impulses to preserve and revisit the past.

For the recent two decades after the Tiananmen student movements, there has been a steady rise of popular protests in China, which involves different social groups—workers, farmers, online activists, and new middle class (Perry, 2009). Social media make it possible for an integration of journalism and collective memory as part of the rising popular protest culture, particularly in online activism. Online activism refers to contentious activities based on the Internet, which are derived from “a broad spectrum of converging and contending forces, technological, cultural, social, and economic, as well as political” (Yang, 2009, 1). These activities engage with contemporary social contentions via a vibrant and creative Internet culture, providing symbolic sources to collective resistance to state power (Yang, 2009). Online activism thus becomes an integral part of popular protests in China. The past has provided various sources of conflict that shape today’s social contention, with the emergence of new technologies and China’s deepening encounter with the world (Perry and Selden, 2010).

Whose modernity?

How does all of this relate to China's orientation to modernity? The relationship between journalism and collective memory, as means of online activism, is situated at the core of China's search for its own route toward modernity. My study examines the contemporary practices of journalism in a society that does not follow the trajectory of Western modernity but holds a complex relationship to the West.

Modernity is first of all a concept that describes the situation of Western society. It is "modes of social life and organization" (Giddens, 1990, 1) that appeared in Europe since the 17th century. The founding texts of modern sociology, the writings of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, are all built upon the social order of modernity: industrialization, secularization, and the total social transformation under the whole capitalist system (Giddens, 1971). In recent decades, modernity has encountered a crisis marked by a sharp break between the past and present experience. This later period of modernity -- called "radical modernity" (Giddens, 1990), "liquid modernity" (Bauman, 2000), or "reflexive modernity" (Lash and Urry, 1994) -- refers to accelerating transformations of social life, including the meltdown of social and institutional boundaries, the increase of individual choices and responsibility, and so on. Yet here too, the characterization of this later period, which generally refers to the contemporary globalizing society, is still based on the situation of Western societies.

Scholars of globalization have questioned the universalization of the Western-centric mode of modernity (Featherstone, Lash & Robertson, 1995). Global-local interactions are still largely understood as how the Rest responds to the West, leaving the dynamics outside the West largely unexamined (Morley, 2007). Scholars examining societies

traditionally considered “non-Western” have argued that modernity takes different shape elsewhere. For example, Garcia Canclini (1995) finds that modernity in Latin America is characterized by “multitemporal heterogeneity”: in each nation, there is a mixture of social institutions and habits derived from tradition and different stages of being modern in a western sense. In East Asia, scholars have developed versions of modernity that are unique to its context. For example, through the analysis of popular culture, Iwabuchi (2007) argues that East Asian countries’ desire to become modern is modeled upon their culturally proximate neighbors other than the Western society.

The increasing mutual consumption of East Asian popular cultures suggests that audiences find resonance in other Asian popular cultures in terms of the ways being modern in East Asian contexts, something that is not simply a response to or imitation of Western modernity (Iwabuchi, 2007, 154).

Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010) situates the idea of Asian modernity in the contexts of decolonization and the end of the Cold War. He suggests looking at modernity within the rich heterogeneity that emerges when reconceptualizing modernity inside local culture and history: “the local formation of modernity carries important elements of the West, but it is not fully enveloped by it.” (223) This provides a new possibility of understanding the West-Rest relation. The West becomes one piece among many, merely one of the cultural resources among others upon which local modernity is built.

Modernity is not a normative drive to become modern, but an analytical concept that attempts to capture the effectiveness of modernizing forces as they negotiate and mix with local history and culture. In other words, modernity as

an analytical term refers to the overall effects of modernization (Chen, 2010, 244).

Therefore, in this conceptualization, modernity is not an invention of the West; instead, the West is an element, a force that affects local cultures. This new model is useful for understanding the experience of China. The Chinese experience of modernity is a complicated process embedded within the unique culture of China across different time periods, entangled with multiple forces including the West and other parts of the world.

These notions about Chinese modernity have direct relevance for the study of journalism, collective memory, and online activism in an era of social media. Though Chen's notion of modernity in Asia aims at provincializing the universal notion of Western-based modernity, my study suggests that the West still plays an important part in Chinese modernity, with the condensed adoption of experiences of modernization from multiple geographical areas and time periods. These elements of Chinese modernity reflect a transitional moment. The uncertainty and anxiety China faces in the globalizing world force it to adopt aspects of existing models of modernity, with Western models still providing sources to contest the status quo. In this study, I argue that we need to understand the Chinese experience of modernity as reflected in its media system and practices, and Westernized ideas continue to play a leading role.

This is relevant to this project because journalism is a product and project of Western modernity, as both the textual system and the sense-making practice of modernity (Hartley, 1996, 33). Both journalism and modernity were aligned with a particular historical mindset, associated with the notions of scientific thoughts, freedom, progress,

and enlightenment (Hartley, 1996). In that global capital expansion brought these ideas to other parts of the world, in the Chinese context journalism came to be considered as both a product of and a road to modernity, namely, the Western model of journalism and modernity. Journalism came to be seen as a tool for China to look at and integrate into the world as a strong nation (de Burgh, 2003), and that notion has persisted since the late 19th century.

The relevance of Western modernity bears out in the sources of authority that support Chinese journalism. Lee (2004) identifies three such sources: Confucianism-liberalism, Maoist-Communism, and Communist-capitalism. Confucianism-liberalism began in the early 1900s and derived from both the Confucian tradition of Chinese intellectuals and Western liberalism. It identified journalists as elites who had a political and social responsibility to enlighten people with their writings, but died out by the 1940s. Maoist-Communism, modeling on the Soviet Union, begun in 1949, emphasizes the propaganda function of the press as a mouthpiece of the Party. Communist-capitalism – begun after the 1980s, especially after 1992 -- is a product of China's economic reform and sees the press as not only performing a function as the Party's mouthpiece but also having to secure market interests, leading the way to new commercialized media forms. It is a consequence of China's embrace of global capitalism.

Just as journalism is the product of a mixture of imported ideas and the situation of China, modernity's unfolding in China is also a hybridized and compressed process. The fast speed of modernization in China in recent decades happened together with rapid cyberization (Chu and Cheng, 2011), while it took centuries for Western society to

complete these two processes. The simultaneity of these two processes is viewed as the density of Chinese modernity (Chu and Cheng, 2011), in which China embraces the world, especially the Western experience of modernity and the advancement of technology, in a very short period of time.

Chinese modernity cannot be understood separately from waves of globalization in the past decades. The first wave is capitalism's global expansion since industrialization, especially after the 19th century, when the narrative of capitalist modernization became the hegemonic paradigm for writing modern Chinese history in China and the West (Wang, 2004). Then, since the 1980s, the public's nostalgic sentiment toward a socialist past has been the main orientation of Chinese collective memory, conjoined with China's embrace of the global market and modernity. The two waves of globalization and modernity are thereby viewed as "traumatic encounters with imperialism, colonialism, and in recent decades, the new powers of global capital." (8)

Contemporary social media in China thus display a condensed experience of "the past 150 years," which approximately refers to China's modern period, dating back to the mid-19th century, when imperial China first encountered rising global capitalist expansion. Discussions of contemporary social issues can be quickly linked to any aspect of China's past 150-year history. Based on this framework, different social groups produce their own interpretations of the "past 150 years" and the meaning of being modern. Two positions dominate: One is the pro-official discourse that describes China as the victim of Western imperialism, promoting the idea of building a strong nation that can compete with the leading countries in the world today. This position reflects the

version of “Chinese characteristics” of modernity, arguing that the Western models cannot provide a right way to save the nation. The other recognizes the positive influence of the West. It celebrates the liberal-democratic ideas such as constitutionalism, human rights, and the rule of law, understanding them as “universal values” and the basic components of being a modern nation.

Weibo is an important venue for these two positions to interact and debate in contemporary China. It offers the Chinese-speaking community opportunities to create different versions of the past tied to China’s quest for modernity. However, as this study also points out, the “Chinese characteristics” versus “universal values” debate on Weibo is only a simplified reflection of what is going on in contemporary Chinese society. Chinese modernity consists of multiple sources and is a hybrid form, and the two sides under debate can be part of each other, reflected in the meanings of modern nation and citizenship. While the Party-led version of modernity emphasizes the uniqueness of Chinese experience and treated Western-based liberal-democratic ideas as harmful, what it aims at is to strengthen the nation in the global world, where the Western society is a primary target that China aims to surpass. While the liberal-leaning discourse criticizes the state-promoted nationalism, it is in itself filled with nationalistic meanings. In the early stage of Weibo, there was a popular slogan, “Surround and watch change China (weiguan gaibian zhongguo).” Although this slogan is rarely mentioned today, still, there is a collective desire to “change China” through participating in public affairs on Weibo. Various collective actions on Weibo ultimately aim at transforming China into a civilized, modernized nation that can be respected in the global society. In order to do so, the liberal-democratic ideas must be realized in China.

1.2. Conceptualizing Journalism, Collective Memory and Online Activism in an Era of Social Media

In the age of social media, there is need to reconsider the meaning of journalism and collective memory, and their implication for online activism. The newly emerging social media environment has invited more personalized participation, instantaneous updates, and networked communication in journalistic practices, and journalism needs to be redefined in terms of participants, professional boundaries, and its role in social transition. Collective memory is also taking a different shape and playing a unique role in a society lacking of channels of citizen participation, in that people may look to the past to compensate for critique of the present that they cannot directly launch. Both of these circumstances enhance the potential for online activism, where people serving a variety of functions can take part in public deliberation and criticism more readily than in earlier times.

Social media and journalism: from Twitter to Weibo

Social media are here defined as websites and web-based services built upon Web 2.0 technology and mobile devices that facilitate peer-to-peer, networked communications and user-generated contents, including blogs, photo/video sharing, micro-blogging, social networking sites, online encyclopedias, among others. While this study does not aim at looking at all existing forms of social media, it attempts to understand social media as an integral part of the Internet-based media forms through analyzing Weibo, a particular but

representative site.¹ As such a networked environment intensifies connectivity, accelerates the sharing of information, and fosters the participation of ordinary citizens, journalism has begun to take on a new shape in the age of digitization and mobile technology. Scholars (van der Haak, Parks, and Castells, 2012) argue that journalism could benefit from the digital age and global network society, with the emerging “networked journalism,” in which journalistic practice involves “networks of various professionals and citizens collaborating, corroborating, correcting, and ultimately distilling the essence of the story that will be told.” (2927)

This study examines one particular social media platform in China, Weibo. It is frequently compared with Twitter, a globally popular micro-blogging service based in the United States. Consequently, Weibo is often understood as the Chinese equivalent of Twitter. Particularly because Twitter is officially banned in China, Weibo plays an irreplaceable role as the leading micro-blogging service in China. Due to the relationship between the two, it is necessary to consider the cultural and technological features of Twitter, especially its impact on journalism, in order to better understand Weibo in the context of contemporary China.

When thinking of Twitter, an important feature to consider is the centrality of self-expression and the performance of self, and the blurring of the conventional boundaries between public and private (Papacharissi, 2012). The centrality of self-expression makes possible the practices of citizen journalism and social activism, which highly emphasize

¹ In this study I refrain from using the term “new media” to refer to the phenomenon I am going to look at, because the notion of “new” is relative. However, I keep the term “new media” when cited works use it.

the role of individuals and grassroots activities in the contestation of institutionalized media systems and representations.

Social media produce a tension between professional norms and the control of news flows as well as the desire for open participation in the digital environment (Lewis, 2012). As personalized practices (Hermida et al, 2012) and collective intelligence in a networked fashion, journalism on Twitter deeply contrasts with the institutionalized authority and expertise of traditional journalism (Hermida, 2012). On Twitter, journalists have a higher level of freedom in expressing opinions than they have in traditional journalism, which challenges the norm of journalism—objectivity (Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton, 2012). An additional challenge to professional journalism regards the accountability and transparency of news making. Journalists are now sharing their own experiences of conducting journalistic work, sharing the process of gathering information and writing stories (*ibid.*), providing behind-the-scenes stories that often cannot be revealed in traditional media.

Noting the real-time, instantaneous and networked communications of social media platforms like Twitter, scholars have characterized Twitter as an “ambient” medium that produces a new kind of journalism called “ambient journalism” (Hermida, 2010). Micro-blogging is an “awareness system” that is “broad, asynchronous, lightweight and always-on” (300-301). Therefore, micro-blogging is not only a system for the instantaneous dissemination of breaking news, but also more importantly a system for alerting journalists to developing trends or issues.

Similarly, Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012) note the ambient nature of Twitter. In particular, the collaborative use of Twitter by journalists, news organizations, and individuals creates “a complex and networked system of social awareness” (268) for when mainstream news/information channels are blocked. Using the example of the Egyptian uprising of early 2011, their study shows that Twitter creates an “ambience”, as news stories are frequently tweeted at a continuous pace, creating a “live and lively environment that sustained online and offline expression of the movement” (276).

However, there are also researchers who hold a skeptical view of the potential of social media sites such as Twitter, especially their ability to sustain revolution. For example, a study by Wojcieszak and Smith (2014) notes that in the uprisings that followed the 2009 Iranian election and those that took place during the Arab Spring, for elite Iranian youth, Twitter was the least prevalent media form, including state-controlled television.

Moreover, on Twitter, politics were not as frequently discussed as were personal issues.

My study is cognizant of the debate between the proponents and skeptics of the efficacy of social media, especially as it concerns Weibo’s potential. Journalism, particularly when connected to online activism, is only a portion of the activities found on Weibo. However, as this study demonstrates, such posts do have an outsized influence, perhaps stronger than their assumed significance warrants, on the awareness of key issues in a transitional society among a wide range of the populace.

As with Twitter, Weibo facilitates self-expression through the individual’s acquisition of “fans”—the Weibo equivalent of “followers,” allowing whatever one posts to have a huge number of viewers and comments. Weibo’s original slogan, “share what happens

around you anytime, anywhere,” encourages its users to post thoughts and insights with a personal perspective. The proliferation of smart phones and wireless connections has popularized the use of Weibo, which enables open participation in journalism and in public debates. The boundary between journalists and non-journalists is not as clear as it once was, suggesting that the traditional norms of journalism are now confronting new challenges. Such instantaneous, real-time, and ever-present informational updates create a web of awareness of the potential development of news events for journalists, Weibo staff and other individuals.

Beyond these similarities, Weibo is quite unique in the context of contemporary China. Most significantly, Weibo supports a much broader space of expression, with its technological features and its integration of media forms. While Weibo has a 140-character limit, in the Chinese language 140 characters is long enough to form a paragraph and tell an entire story. Weibo also accommodates longer posts by converting full-length blog entries into an image that can be attached to the original tweet and viewed by followers immediately. In this way, users do not have to go to a particular blog to look for full-length explanations or in-depth accounts. Weibo also integrates the functions of online video and photo sharing sites. Additionally, Weibo allows users to comment on a tweet, instead of having to generate a retweet for every comment, as it is on Twitter. In this way, Weibo also maintains the functionality of online forums (BBS) and blogs.

The inaccessibility of Twitter in China makes Weibo a suitable substitute, however it is subject to stricter and more direct state control, and as this study will demonstrate, it has

adopted many sophisticated strategies for circumventing such control. The relationship between users, Weibo administrators and the state is thus more complicated than the state simply shutting down a service like Twitter or an entire Internet service, as had happened in Egypt and other Arab countries during their uprisings.

Journalism and the journalistic community

In social media, journalism has become decentralized both from news media institutions and from particular locations. The notion of liquid journalism (Deuze 2008), borrowed from Bauman's (2000) idea of liquid modernity, is particularly useful in understanding the melting boundaries of journalism. Liquid journalism, as a de-institutionalized practice, serves the networked society, privileging each individual citizen's role as user and maker of his/her own news, and advocates for a collaborative, responsive and interactive journalistic culture (Deuze, 2008, 858).

The participants of journalism in social media, the journalistic community, are not limited to professional journalists working for traditional media institutions (including news websites). Broadly defined, they also include media institutions, cultural/political commentators for media, scholars, columnists, and ordinary citizens that engage in reporting daily news events. Throughout multiple critical moments that have been widely discussed on Weibo, I am particularly interested in journalists and other individuals in the journalistic community who share critical views of the current Party-state system in China, and they are increasingly getting visible to a wider range of public through this platform. I define these people as liberal-leaning users. In general, they are inclined to and support a liberal-democratic political model, express a desire for freedom of

expression and human rights, and share a vision of democratization in China. This liberal-leaning group of users is not coming from nowhere. As noticed by some Chinese observers, there has already been a “liberal Chinese blogger community” (MacKinnon, 2012, 42). While most of these people have had the experience of their Weibo accounts being deleted or banned permanently, their presence added the liberal atmosphere to Weibo. Not everyone in the journalistic community shares this same view, as social media also host users that hold oppositional opinions, but social media also open up more spaces for liberal-leaning groups.

In adopting a broadened concept of journalism in the age of social media, this study aims at problematizing the conventional boundaries set for journalism. Participants in social media who do not fit into the existing categories (professional and citizen journalism) also contribute to reporting public events. Journalists are no longer just serving their media institutions in the newsroom or conducting daily routines of news making. They participate in interactions on social media both as individuals and as representatives of their media institutions, sharing their personal experiences in reporting news and transporting media contents onto Weibo. In this process they have built up connections with other social groups active in social media, which include but are not limited to scholars, lawyers, activists, and business leaders.

Collective memory

In this study, collective memory is understood as the representation of an event from the past. It is constructed through narratives and images, shared and remembered by social groups at different levels (global, national, local, etc.) that serve present purposes. I am

particularly interested in how social media users invoke the past within a seemingly paradoxical relationship between a digitized and networked environment that favors instantaneous updates of information and a cultural and collective need to interpret contemporary news events through the lens of the past.

This study situates the formation of collective memory in the contemporary networked society, where digital and mobile devices speed up the coverage and distribution of news events and make it easier to store and archive the sounds, images, and words captured by those devices. Studies on collective memory in the digital age have mainly focused on the changing technological features and their impact on how we remember (van Dijk, 2007, 2011; Hoskins 2009; Reading, 2009). This study also examines the impact of technological features of social media (micro-blogging) on collective memory, but it views technology as providing possibilities of changes rather than leading to these changes.

In general, the scholarship of collective memory recognizes two approaches to the past-present relationship. One regards collective memory as a present construction, in the service of present needs to shape group identity. The other regards collective memory as a selection from the pool of past events to make sense of the present, so that the past has value in itself. Halbwachs (1992) asserts that memory is socially based, consisting of collective recollections and remembrances, but as he also acknowledged, “Only those recollections subsist that in every period society, working within its present-day frameworks, can reconstruct” (189). Schwartz (1982), on the other hand, asserts that the

making of memory is a process of selection from the pre-existing past, carried out by highlighting certain facts and concealing or neglecting others.

The construction versus selection debate regarding the past paves the way for the development of collective memory studies (Neiger, Meyers, and Zandberg, 2011). This study understands collective memory as both a present construction and a selection from past events, which are constant processes of negotiation. Particularly in social media, it is so because the speedy updates of events shortens the distance between the past and present, or even blurs the boundary between the two.

It is worth noting that collective memory is also a concept that emerged from Euro-American experiences of modernity. The distinction between past and present is seen as a product of modern society, crafted in association with industrialization, the birth of the nation-state, and the celebration of rationality. At the same time, modernity marks a crisis of memory, as suggested by scholars examining the history of European nation-states. Nora (1989) suggests that in the modern times we lose a living relation to the past, as memory has been confined to places (“lieux” of memory) separated from the daily lives. The processes that “separate social life from locality and from human dimensions” (Cornnerton 2009, 5) are characteristic of modernity. This separation from local and daily experience characterizes modernity as “forgetful.” With the forgetfulness of modernity and crisis of memory, recent decades saw increasing interests in memory, challenging the notions that are associated with Western modernity such as the linearity of history or homogeneous national identity (Olick and Robbins, 1998). In challenging longstanding notions of collective memory, this study thus hopes to complicate the Western foundation

from which most aspects of its conceptualization draw. Participants in the social media described here deepen the conventional understanding of the past/present distinction.

Journalism, collective memory and online activism

In this study, I examine the relationship between journalism and collective memory as a means of online activism occurring in the social media of a transitional society, which exhibits increasing levels and diverse forms of social contention. Few academic works have specifically emphasized the role of journalism as a particular vehicle of collective memory in the contemporary Chinese context. Most of them focus on the past represented in literary and cinematic forms (e.g. Cai, 2013; Wang, 2004). In a society with strong state power penetrating every aspect of life, and free expression is not guaranteed by law due to the lack of judicial independence (MacKinnon, 2012), I argue that collective memory becomes a convenient tool for journalism to struggle for more freedom and expansion of its realm of engagement in public events, mobilizing larger groups of citizens.

Journalism is inherently connected to the past, as the past provides an interpretive framework for the present, in the form of commemoration, historical analogy, and providing historical context for the present event (Edy, 1999). The past creates opportunities for comparison, analogy, nostalgia, and revisiting earlier events in journalism (Zelizer, 2008). Journalism, whether in the form of words or images, enables the invocation of past events in understanding current news, mobilizing public opinion and encouraging public engagement (Zelizer, 2010). Media ownership, the state-market relationship, and the nature of the past event being remembered (e.g. the temporal

distance, geographical location, official's attitude, global visibility, etc.), all enable and constrain the representation of certain aspects of the past simultaneously.

Journalism's connection to the preservation and interpretation of past events gives journalism cultural authority over the past. Schudson (1992) acknowledges the news media as indices of the available public knowledge of the past (4), among various cultural forms and vehicles through which the reservoir of the past event was handed down. Journalists as participants in the formation of collective memory belong to an interpretive community (Zelizer, 1993), through which they share their interpretations of key public events collectively and thus form a coherent group identity and authority. Journalists thus create a "repertoire of past events," which is used as a standard to judge contemporary events and actions (223-4). The standard repertoire of the past builds up community, articulating and reinforcing group identity among readers. At the same time, the journalistic invocation of past events reduces the meaning of current news to a patterned understanding, blocking alternative and indigenous interpretations of the present, on the basis of a national or Westernized framework (Zelizer 1998, 2011). This study finds that journalism's authority over the memory of a public event not only comes from the media institution or professional practices of journalists, but also from their involvement in various degrees of activism. The networked, online and participatory media environment produces multiple authorities and contentious contents that in turn help us see the role of journalism differently.

As this study shows, individuals and organizations involved in traditional news production also participate in social media, which makes social media a site for

competition not only between professional and citizen journalism but also between media institutions and individuals. Social media platforms blend these boundaries of journalism in the face of state control. Those who are not conventionally considered journalists take part in the production of news and interpretation of past and present events as a means of collective resistance. In this way, the authority of the past has shifted to the personal level, rather than at the level of the media institution or within the professional standards of journalism. Because they are better able to counter the state monopoly of certain versions of the past, social media facilitate the struggle for more journalistic freedom through online activism.

1.3 Three tensions in the analysis of social media in China

The central inquiry of this study is driven by the analysis of three related tensions prevalent in social media, which reflect contemporary social transitions transpiring in China. First, in that social media platforms are contentious spaces that bear increasingly sophisticated means of media control by the state alongside various tactics of resistance by their users, this study situates journalism against a background of simultaneous increasingly proactive state control (Zhou, 2006) of the Internet and online activism (Yang, 2009). Technology, market and state all simultaneously constrain and set free certain aspects of journalistic practice as it takes shape through social media. This study illustrates the complexity of state power and its public response through journalistic practices in contemporary Chinese context.

Second, the proliferation and density of news events in social media speed up information relay and shorten the distance between the past and present. The changing temporality in

social media has transformed how we remember and how the past is used for the present. In a society where direct criticism of state power is not allowed, the past becomes a powerful tool to launch criticism of the present and initiate collective resistance to the state power. My study also questions the centrality of European experience in studying collective memory based on the evolution of modern European nation-states, such as Hobsbawm (1983) and Nora (1996).

Third, the de-territorialized communication of social media, the transnational flow of news and mobility of people transcend geographical boundaries and enhance the global-local dynamics of news making. The global Chinese connection that is characteristic of social media mobilizes an intense global-local exchange of news and opinions that undermines Chinese nationalism in interpreting and remembering public events. Unlike the Westernized mainstream journalistic framework that sets standard of the global past and blocks alternative and indigenous interpretations of the past and present (Zelizer, 2011), I examine how social media are shifting the patterned understanding, highlighting the local experience within the global flow of information.

Thus, this study examines how social media in contemporary Chinese society change journalistic practices, within the paradoxical relationship between the transient, instantaneous news updating characteristic of social media platforms and the need for preserving and archiving what has taken place. In doing so, I focus on three intersecting tensions that are characteristic of social media's engagement in public events— control and resistance, past and present, and global and local. This study aims at exploring how journalism relies on collective memory as a means of online activism, understanding the

dilemmas of transitional societies searching for its own route of modernity and meaning of a modern nation.

Control and resistance: redefining the boundary of journalism

This study suggests that control and resistance are part of each other, especially when the private-owned, market-oriented Internet companies are subject to state control. I argue that social media carry on both control and resistance, taking on a balancing position between market interests and political safety. The Internet corporations that provide social media services thus have to function by accommodating both the requirements of the state and the desire of market. I also argue that the conventional distinction between professional and citizen journalism is problematic in a society where, due to the state penetration and lack of information transparency, journalism has to traverse its boundaries in accommodating online activism.

While having a strong desire to embrace the global market, the Chinese government still maintains strict control of the media, economically and ideologically. From the political economy perspective, the means of media control are determined by media ownership (Schudson, 2002). This study targets a hybrid media system of varied levels of marketization and state control, with unpredictable and ever-changing bottom lines of censorship. Such complexity and instability suggest that there is no such simple dichotomy as state control and popular (bottom-up) resistance.

The Chinese media system has been the subject of various studies since the 1980s economic reform, particularly after China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. Most of these studies focused on the structural level. China's entry into

the WTO was regarded as a turning point for its structural transformation from the market socialism model to the state-controlled capitalism corporation model, and this transformation also had effect on the media system. While trying to fulfill WTO requirements by opening up its media market, the Chinese government maintains firm ownership and political control of media outlets (Huang, 2007). Media reform in China thus supports a group of state media conglomerates (Bai, 2005), and the media system is moving toward a hybrid of political authoritarianism and capitalism (Winfield and Peng, 2005). The hybridity of this media system is also reflected in the Internet.

As MacKinnon (2012) puts it, the situation in the regulation and management of China's information networks and media is described as "networked authoritarianism," which has key components of "total opacity and government co-optation of the private sector in carrying out political censorship and surveillance." (32) In a networked authoritarianism, the authoritarian regime can maintain itself and at the same time a lively and contentious deliberation online, as long as certain limits are set (44).

While authoritarianism foments censorship from the state, there are many subtler ways to suppress freedom of expression (George, 2012). State control of the Internet is not simply implemented through top-down means, such as filtering the "sensitive words" from the search engine results, deleting posts, and banning websites and services. In addition to these, control of the Internet is conducted in a more sophisticated manner. Although China's formal connection to the Internet only took place less than two decades ago (1994), Internet use has been growing explosively since then (Zhou, 2006; Yang, 2009). Beyond simple suppressive methods are subtle means and strategies of control, through

which the Internet can be used in the service of the government, which is understood as “proactive control” conducted by the Chinese government (Zhou, 2006). For example, recently governments and officials at all levels in China are opening their Weibo accounts, as an attempt to take advantage of this emerging technology and platform, so that the authorities could track the development of critical issues and take action before they explode (MacKinnon, 2012). There is no set rule for the Internet control in China, but it is a reciprocal process, a response to the increasingly sophisticated strategies employed by netizens² to bypass control mechanisms and vice versa (Marolt, 2011).

However, these control mechanisms do not always take effect. The government cannot take complete control because of the conflicting interests of local officials seeking to use the Internet to develop the local economy and other interests (Zhou, 2006). Moreover, regulations always lag behind the development of new technology. As the Internet becomes an effective tool for the state in regulating and controlling, it also enables the society to have more collective actions organized through its platforms (Zheng, 2008).

The control of media production meets resistance in various forms. Media texts are polysemic, which can invoke diverse readings from the audience and produce meanings of resistance (Hall, 1980; de Certeau, 1984). There are always ways for people to bypass media control by appropriating official/mainstream media contents or creating their own small media (Yang, 2009, 46). Weibo is not a “small medium” created by ordinary citizens as a form of resistance. Instead, the users take advantage of the technological and

² “Netizen” (wangmin) is a term coined by the public and scholars to describe Chinese Internet users, a combination of “net” and “citizen.”

administrative features of a commercial media platform to develop their own way of resistance.

The space of resistance for journalists and media-related practitioners is very limited in their daily work at media institutions. However, media censorship is very flexible in China. It varies according to the nature of developing news. The control is tightened during certain period of time, such as the conventions of the central committee of the Communist Party, important global events (e.g. the Olympics), major disasters and anniversaries of key events (e.g. June 4th). Other than these, the government has relatively more tolerance and does not impose heavy hand of censorship.

There are many opportunities for Chinese media practitioners and organizations to develop techniques and strategies to circumvent censorship and explore more discursive spaces. Journalists' improvisation (Pan, 2000) is one example. Journalists, especially individuals like chief editors and producers, are required to be extraordinarily sensitive to the ever-changing boundary of the government's tolerance of journalistic freedom. This sensitivity enables journalists to develop sophisticated methods in competition with official discourses when they transfer to social media platforms.

This means that the collective resistance evident on social media platforms is a continuation and expansion of old forms of contention. Various genres and rituals that are used on Internet-based media are developed from traditional popular contentions (Yang, 2009). While state power is trying to take control of the Internet by employing different methods that could set constraints at the organizational, content, and individual levels, the strengthening of state control leads to more creative reactions from online activists

(Yang, 2009). This creativity is rooted in previous Internet media forms. For example, at the end of the 1990s and in the early 21st century, when BBS was the main online communication tool and blogs barely existed in China, a group of intellectuals published critical and analytical articles online on news and current affairs, most of them political in content (Zhou, 2006). Zhou (2006) defines this group as “*minjian*” intellectuals, meaning the opposite of official. This earlier form of non-official media commentaries paved the way for later competing voices in social media platforms.

This study explores how social media provide possibilities for citizen participation in contesting state power through journalistic practices. In the Chinese context, the potential of social media is limited as a result of censorship, but still there are spaces for resistance, with the active role played by journalism. I mainly examine two agents: Internet companies and journalists, which illustrate the complexity between control and resistance.

In this study I argue that Internet companies are an important part of journalism, mediating control and resistance. As private-owned companies, they need to make efforts to maximize profitability by meeting the demand of the market, and thus the demand of their users. At the same time, the nature of all Chinese media institutions as both market-oriented and state-controlled, including the Internet, requires companies to follow state rule. The state control of the Internet can do harm to the Internet companies, but it also produces desirable consequences to the companies, such as eliminating their international competitors who could not obey censorship, which in turn benefits the authoritarian regime (MacKinnon, 2012).

In particular, as Sina identifies itself as a news medium and the central function of Weibo a news platform, it is subject to the censorship carried on in news media. On the one hand, the Internet companies have to scrutinize information flow, identifying important news events and making decisions whether to promote certain topics or delete relevant posts based on the perceived level of risk. On the other hand, they deliberately emphasize their status as news platforms that are different from traditional news channels, aiming at providing alternative perspectives within the limits set by the state.

Journalists thus take on double identities in the control-resistance relationship. As professional journalists they have authority over news events and usually larger numbers of followers than ordinary social media users. Therefore, they can forward posts to a wider range of their followers, while ordinary citizens doing on-site coverage need their support to make events widely known. At the same time, professional journalists have to go personal in on-site updates in order to avoid the stricter censorship placed on them due to their institutional affiliation. Thus, the collaboration between journalists and non-journalists, as well as their switching roles, redefine the boundary of journalism.

Past and present: collective memory in a digital age

The division between past and present is key to conceptualizing collective memory. In my study, the past has a two-fold meaning. First, it is viewed as what we conventionally call “history,” events that have been recorded, curated, and circulated among the public in the form of textbooks, official discourse, memorial sites, etc. This is understood as the “remote past,” bearing a considerable temporal distance from the present. Second, the past also refers to the making of memory on a daily basis, in which updating and

archiving can take place at the same time. Digitization and networked communication, and the mobile technology that facilitates the instantaneous coverage of news events worldwide, have shortened the time it takes for a news event to both spread and fade away from the public's attention. The present is easily turned into the past, no matter how "recently" it took place. An event can be forgotten immediately, or it can be remembered and recycled whenever a similar event takes place. This is called the "instantaneous past."

Both types of the past surface in social media, but the latter one is more prominent. Digital, networked, and mobile-mediated communications produce "infinite archives and unpredictable emergence of images and sounds", challenging the meaning of authority and credibility created by the broadcast media (Hoskins, 2009: 31). As social media become an integral part of everyday life, memory-making becomes a daily practice, and the exchange of past experiences is immediate, as Hoskins (2009) argues:

[Social network memory is] fluid, de-territorialised, diffused and highly revocable, but also immediate, accessible and contingent on the more dynamic schemata forged through emergent sociotechnical practices (41).

Therefore, memory in the age of a digital and networked society cannot be understood by a clear past/present distinction any more. Archiving can happen on a daily basis, and memory can be accessed instantaneously, challenging the institutional control of both media and memory. This study thus examines collective memory given the shortened distance between past and present and the blurred boundary of the two in everyday life,

which leads to an understanding that differs from our conventional ideas of memory based on a discernible past-present distance.

All of this is relevant to the question of China's search for modernity. By and large the study of collective memory started by drawing on historical events and framework primarily from the European perspective. These included the establishment of modern European nation-states, the idea of modernity itself, and the two World Wars in the first half of the 20th century, etc. (e.g. Hobsbawm, 1983; Connerton, 2009; Nora, 1996; Winter, 1995). In particular, the Holocaust became the primary focus and a standardized framework for the interpretation of genocide and other kinds of traumatic experience in other parts of the world (Zelizer, 1998). Similarly, studies of collective memory in the U.S. mainly focused on the key events and key figures in its national history, such as the Civil War and the Vietnam War, Lincoln, and the founding fathers. America's construction of collective memories came to be understood through its key institutions—the U.S. Capitol, national memorials, national media, etc.—that set up the dominant narrative of these events (e.g., Schwartz 1982; Schudson, 1992; Sturken, 1997). Although there are geographical variations, such as post-dictatorship South America (Huysen, 2006), the “global” memory sources that have helped shape local memory thus have come primarily from the West.

This study thereby contributes to the understanding of collective memory by going beyond the remembering of a particular event or time period, with an emphasis on the role of journalism in the case of China, which has been less examined. Studies of collective memory in the Chinese context usually focus on how individual events and

particular historical periods were remembered through fiction, artistic forms and autobiographic writings (Wang, 2004), and the uniqueness of the Chinese historical context is highlighted.

In this study, I argue that social media open up spaces for journalists and other ordinary citizens to contribute to the rewriting of history, challenging the official monopoly of history. The remote past has also provided sources to contest the present. Meanwhile, the instantaneous past, in different types of mnemonic practices, has provided strategic tools for struggling for journalistic freedom.

Global and local: Transnational news flow and global Chinese identity

Social media traverse the boundaries of nation-states. The role of collective memory in journalism and its implication on online activism need to be understood on multiple levels of global information flow, which are becoming more intensive with technological diffusion and current trends of transnational mobility of people. At the same time, social media are deeply rooted in the historical and cultural contexts of a particular society. In this study, the global-local tension in social media brings about a new version of Chinese identity, as an antithesis to the version promoted by the state over the past decades and in the contemporary moment of social transition.

This study redefines Chineseness in a global setting, by examining the news flow on Weibo as a service to Chinese-speaking users regardless of location. These individuals have a shared written language and global network accessibility. Participants in Chinese-language social media sites range across the Greater China region (China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan) and Singapore, as well as Chinese-speaking communities in other

parts of the world. Global news flow not only takes shape through the influx of global coverage by foreign media but also through information relay across Chinese people who have high levels of transnational mobility.

The use of new media enables the formation of trans-local publics (Ong, 2003), which shifts the center-periphery relation in terms of the relationship between Chinese people in China and Chinese people in the diaspora. Ang also (2001) argues for a de-centralization of China in understanding Chineseness. This study recognizes that the diversity and increasing mobility of Chinese people living outside or moving across borders frequently are a central part of understanding Chineseness. However, as this study shows, the centrality of China is still maintained on Weibo, though it no longer speaks to the state-promoted ideas of Chinese that emphasize loyalty to homeland.

The global Chinese connection thus forms a Chinese identity that diverges from the one promoted by the state, targeting Chinese citizens and people with Chinese ethnicity residing inside and outside China. The global reach of Chinese-language media, such as Weibo, becomes the primary venue for airing the different meanings of being Chinese. As this study shows, the imagined community created by the media (Anderson, 1991) does not necessarily bring about a unified national identity that favors the nation-state. This imagined community could base its shared vision of an idealized nation-state among the liberal-leaning users, which is used to challenge the current regime.

There are two visions about the meaning of being Chinese in the global world that are popular on Weibo. They become the central issue debated and contested over public events on Weibo. The meaning of being Chinese that has been shaped by the liberal-

leaning groups is based on “universal values,” a set of ideas that are developed from liberal-democratic thoughts of modern Western society, such as democracy, freedom of expression, individual human rights and constitutionalism, which can build a truly modern and civilized nation. This shared vision challenges another one that is also quite popular on Weibo, which emphasizes that the uniqueness of Chinese experience requires China to take a route different from the West in the revival of the nation in the world. The latter colluded with the Communist Party’s vision of China’s future, highlighting the “Chinese characteristics.” These two visions compete with each other in the platform of Weibo during major news events, leading to further debates regarding modernity in China. As previously pointed out, these two versions are not simply contesting each other. Instead, they are part of each other, both envisioning a modern nation.

In the global-local news flow of social media, collective memory has taken a different shape. As Zelizer (2011) points out, the practices of journalism that are conducted by media institutions using a Westernized platform tend to marginalize local memories and reinforce the asymmetrical Western-Other relation in global news flow. This study extends this critique by shifting the focus from the Western mainstream media’s global coverage to the centrality of Chinese-language media and social media platforms. Events with global visibility can be interpreted by the invocation of local pasts, and instead of the global devouring the local, local events can have broader meaning when compared with a past event with global significance.

The global news flow via social media platforms changes how a particular news event is understood and remembered within the framework of different meanings of Chineseness.

The Chinese-language media flow in social media platforms discussed in this study involves two types of social media users—Chinese-speaking people who live outside China or move frequently in between, and people living inside China who have access to global and media resources. They collaborate to circumvent the Great Firewall³ that aims at blocking foreign Internet services and contents to Chinese Internet users. The global mobility of Chinese-speaking social media users also accommodates diverse opinions.

The consequences of the intensified news flow on a global scale and the increasing mobility of people on a transnational basis also problematize nationalism as the dominant framework for news production and consumption. This global-local relationship in social media challenges nationalism as a dominant framework in journalistic practices and the making of collective memory. Meanwhile, although the nation-state still makes efforts at implementing media control, as seen with China, this study argues that global and local forces undermine its controlling power and authority in interpreting public events.

1.4 Methodology

The research site on which this study is based exists in an online environment, and its participants come from a wide range of geographical areas. For these reasons, virtual ethnography was used as the major methodological tool of this study. The study considers the link between texts, positioning particular micro-blogging posts in the textual chains that are formed through interaction. I also conducted interviews with Weibo users

³ The Great Firewall (GFW) is a series of Internet censorship and surveillance system (official name Golden Shield Project), including technologies and administrative regulations. It was launched in 1998, operated by the Ministry of Public Security, and has become increasingly sophisticated since. Now Chinese netizens often use the “Wall” to refer to GFW.

(individual), media institutions (official Weibo accounts of media outlets), and executives, administrators, editors and technological support at Sina.com.

Ethnography in the age of new media

The ethnographic approach is employed by scholars to understand media-related phenomena, including audience analysis (e.g. Morley 1980; Ang 1996; Bird 2003), the daily practices of journalism (e.g. Tuchman 1978), and in a more recent research trend of online communities (e.g. Baym, 1998; Boellstorff, 2008). According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2003), ethnography involves “the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions-in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research” (3). Machin (2007) defines the ethnographic process as “the detailed and systematic study of a culture through participation in its everyday occurrences and observation of even the finest detail”(23). Both of these definitions highlight the ethnographer’s role as participant and the concern with everyday life in the culture under study.

Mass mediation and technology have pushed ethnography to its very limits (Jackson, 2008), which have made it difficult to confine ethnographic study to a particular physical site. New media technology pushes the boundary of ethnography further. Moving forward to the age of Internet-based communication, in which our everyday life becomes saturated with the Internet and mobile technologies, the territorial boundaries are not as distinct, and it is more difficult to differentiate the processes of production and consumption of media contents. Particularly, Web 2.0 technology facilitates the peer-to-

peer sharing of contents produced by individual users, which additionally eliminates the producer/consumer distinction. Therefore, mediated ethnography must recognize the absence of boundaries, considering the field as network and nodes (Hine, 2000: 61). This study sees the different moments of mediation (production-texts-reception) as part of each other, and recognizes the absence of boundaries and the emphasis of connectivity and flow. Therefore, there is no need to examine whether people behave differently online and offline, or if they simply consider their online life as an extension of the offline, since social media become an integral part of everyday life.

Research site: Weibo

As a service provided by sina.com, one major portal in China, the micro-blogging (Weibo) gets its website and URL name independently (<http://weibo.com>). Weibo is not the first micro-blogging service launched in China. Prior to that, there were some Twitter-like micro-blogging services but closed due to censorship. After its launch in August 2009, Weibo became well known, and more micro-blogging services hosted by Chinese portals were launched.

I became a registered Weibo user in March 2010, seven months after its kickoff. I registered with my legal name and ID number in China.⁴ On my profile page, I used several tags to describe myself, including “Ph.D. student in the U.S.,” “communication,” and “social media” and “collective memory.” In this way whoever finds me on Weibo

⁴ Real name (and mobile phone number) registration was voluntary in the beginning but has been required since March 2012. However, as of now, the real name registration has not been implemented effectively as expected.

and has shared interests can follow⁵ me, and I can locate potential informants through them. I also actively searched particular Weibo users to follow. I started by following journalists and media professionals who are widely known among Chinese people. Their profiles are highlighted on Weibo's home page, so their presence in Weibo is highly visible. Most of them have huge numbers of followers and are active in interaction.

Following journalist Weibo users provided me with an opportunity to understand how the latest news spread within Weibo and the Internet sphere. What interested me more was these journalists' interest in what we consider memory practices. They bring back past events while reporting and discussing the current news; they make efforts to keep the public remembering what is happening, against official attempts to censor their reports; they also become actively involved in the investigation of past events. This connection between now and then brought about by journalists outside their daily working routines motivated me to further investigate the construction of collective memory through journalism in its social media platforms. Then, in addition to journalists and media-related individuals, I also followed people who were active in public events and closely connected to journalists and the media.

During my study, there were several critical moments with outbursts of discussions and debates in Weibo, which I call "topical events," drawing on the notions of "critical incident" (Zelizer, 1992) and "new media event" (Chan and Qiu, 2011). A critical incident involves a major crisis that calls for rapid information relay, an event that

⁵ Similar to Twitter, on Weibo, individual users can use the "follow" function. To follow a user, one needs to press the bottom "to follow this user" on that user's Weibo profile page. Once a person follows a particular user, his or her updates will appear in his or her timeline.

facilitates journalists' negotiation of their professional boundaries (Zelizer, 1992). "New media event" is coined after Dayan and Katz's famous notion of "media event" (1992). A new media event is mediated by new communication technologies (i.e. the Internet and mobile technologies). Unlike the traditional "media event," which emphasizes the pre-planning, live broadcasting and global visibility that reinforce the elite-based, grand narrative of history, the new media event highlights citizen journalism in the formation of public opinion and the writing of history, with the unplanned and unfolding elements of a story, and the empowerment of citizens using new media technologies (Chan and Qiu, 2011).

My study is motivated by combining these two notions into the idea of a "topical event." A topical event, as I define it, involves elements of crisis and thus a collective need for quick information relay, a significant level of public visibility, the potential for being recognized as an event that should be remembered publicly, and evidence of the active participation and opinion leadership of journalism in social media platforms. Above all, a topical event takes place in social media, but it is not simply an Internet-based event, as it influences a much wider range of the public through social media. A topical event also invites further reflection upon journalistic practices. Among the topical events in this study, most for them were breaking news stories or anniversaries of important events, ranging across global, national, and local dimensions. Besides the topical events, there were also many historical events frequently cited and debated among Weibo users. In the appendix section, I list all topical events that were mentioned in this study. These events either included particular memory practices (e.g., commemorations), or contained elements similar to happenings from the past, so that people could cite past events as a

commentary on present ones, or use present events as an opportunity to revisit a past on which the media and public are not allowed to conduct further inquiry.

There are several features that make Weibo a particularly interesting case for understanding the dynamics in social media as a platform for journalism's work, especially in collective memory making and online resistance. First of all, the Weibo server is located in China and can be accessed by the majority of Chinese Internet users, which guarantees a large user basis. Due to the control of the Internet implemented by the Chinese government, accessing social media sites that are globally popular, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, is very difficult for the majority of Internet users in China, who do not have sufficient technological support to circumvent the Great Firewall. There are still a great number of people who do not even know the existence of such websites and services outside China. Taking Twitter as an example, those who tweet in Chinese are either technologically savvy or politically dissident, along with some overseas Chinese. Their voices are hardly heard by Chinese people who do not have access to Twitter and therefore have only a limited influence in China. People on Twitter have made attempts to post their tweets on China's micro-blogging websites including Weibo, but due to strict censorship, these tweets and even user IDs are quickly detected and deleted by the web administrators. The accessibility of Weibo by the majority of Chinese people in China and other Chinese communities guarantees its influence on a remarkable amount of users. This is also the reason why the Chinese government is so anxious and uneasy about the fast growth of Weibo's users and its influence.

Second, although Weibo is always said to be the Chinese equivalent of Twitter, its

structure and contents are much more complicated than Twitter and are tailored to the Internet use habits of Chinese users. On Twitter, public interactions can only be made through re-tweeting, which means that if one replies to a tweet, a new tweet will be generated that will appear in all of his or her followers' timeline so that everyone can see it. Weibo, however, separates the two functions of repost (re-tweet) and comment. The comment function is similar to most online forums (BBS) and blogs, with which most users are familiar. Weibo is multi-functional not only in that it allows both comments and reposts, but also in its partial role as a social networking site. For example, in terms of language use, like those on Twitter who are "following" someone or being "followed" by someone, Weibo users are also "friending" or becoming a "fan" of someone. The latest new function of Weibo also allows a user to create a "circle of friends," limiting one's tweets to this circle. In addition, Weibo has survived for a relatively long period of time (four years since it was launched) compared with other micro-blogging services in China. It can thus provide sufficient evidence for this study, allowing the researcher to see changes over time.

Third, the length of a Weibo post provides more space of expression than Twitter. Twitter allows a length of 140 characters for a tweet, which is relatively short in written English. Although the word limit of Weibo is also 140 characters, the meaning that the same length of Chinese characters could express is far more than that of English. This length of post give more space for Weibo users to tell a short story, write a comment and share a link without thinking about how to cut their sentences short and use shortened versions that can make their posts incomprehensible for people who are unfamiliar with those shortened expressions. The fullness of expression makes the posts more straightforward

in meaning. Furthermore, the discussion topics in Weibo are diverse, but news and current affairs are the primary focus. Compared to other micro-blogging services and other popular social media sites in China, Weibo is of particular importance as it is always the first to report breaking news and to generate public discussions that then become heated issues in cyberspace and the mainstream media. In this way, Weibo has more credibility as an alternative news source for ordinary citizens, and it becomes an entry point for newspapers and television stations to follow news events. As a site that is shared by citizen journalists, journalists from mainstream media, other individuals doing media-related work, and media institutions, Weibo becomes a prism through which we can understand journalism in the age of social media.

Last but not least, like other media forms in China, Weibo is under the control of the Chinese government, but the characteristics of the medium allow for non-official voices to be heard. In recent years, Weibo has been considered as an alternative source of news and a space where people are relatively free to speak in public. The interactions and activities among citizens have already taken effect by challenging the monopoly of information by officials and even questioning the legitimacy of the regime. In response, the state has taken a series of actions to strengthen its control over Weibo and other micro-blogging services, such as anti-rumor campaigns, real name registrations, permanent closing down of certain user accounts without notification, and temporary suspensions of comment functions, etc. This kind of new control mechanism places Weibo in a dangerous position, and its future is unpredictable. Such a circumstance makes Weibo worthy of examination as a highly contentious place.

In this research, I identify the topical events through Weibo's "hottest topics of the day" (later changed to "micro-topics") function. When a major event (e.g., breaking news such as the 2011 earthquake in Japan) takes place, Weibo creates a topic page that collects micro-blogging posts with relevant key words,⁶ which often includes on-site firsthand reports, journalists' live updates, and general discussions or debates. In later "micro-topic" era, a topic page is created, and often a timeline for the development of an event is drawn. In addition, the new "micro-topic" is more interactive, as a user can apply to be the monitor of a topic, moderating debates of two sides that hold different opinions on an event.

I did not follow a particular event until the earthquake in Japan took place in March 2011, which marked an important moment of collaboration between traditional and social media. The event was prominent on a global scale, drawing the attention of media all over the world. Hundreds of journalists in China were dispatched to file on-site reports from the disaster area, and almost all national and local media outlets in China devoted their most prominent spaces to the coverage of this disaster.

Weibo created a topic page for this event, on which I found journalists and media users in the "suggest following" section. Every time there was an outburst of discussion on certain kinds of topical events (see appendix C), I added more people to follow through Weibo's suggestions. I created a register of topical events and the approximate dates when related discussions appeared (see appendix) and categorized these events into three types: 1) anniversaries and commemorations; 2) breaking news, especially disasters and accidents;

⁶ These key words are marked by hashtags, similar to Twitter's trending topics.

3) crises in daily life. These events had special connections to the shaping of collective memory through the work of journalism.

In total, I conducted 18 in-depth interviews with Weibo users and Sina staff (see appendix B). By users, I refer to the registered individuals and organizations on Weibo. Most of the interviews took place in July and August 2012 in Beijing and Hong Kong, and others were conducted online in September and October 2012. Although my study incorporates a broad range of users, the journalistic community is at the core of my analysis. In later chapters, I build upon connections between the journalistic community and other social groups with shared concerns.

In addition to interviews, I have been keeping track of the posts of particular individuals and institutions, especially those who self-identify as members belonging to the journalistic community and key individuals involved in those events (citizen journalists, victims of an accident, witnesses, etc.). The people I follow cover a wide range of geographical locations across the Chinese-speaking community.

1.5 Organization of the dissertation

This dissertation is organized on the basis of the three sets of tension that are prevalent on Weibo. Chapter two examines the tension between control and resistance, in which journalism is at the core of social media platforms. It addresses how social media platforms like Weibo produce a new model of journalism, one situated in the face of intensifying state control and increasingly sophisticated collective resistance. This chapter examines the complexity of control and resistance, and looks at the dilemma of

Sina as it runs Weibo as a news platform, and the melting boundary of institutional and personal practices of journalism that emerge in order to resist state control.

Chapter three focuses on the past-present relationship, examining how social media change the ways in which people remember public events. Chapter three both analyzes the formation and use of collective memory in social media and lists the basic technological features of social media, Weibo in particular, which facilitate certain aspects of collective memory formation. It analyzes how two forms of the past—the remote past and the instantaneous past—are used in news coverage and public discussion, especially as a tool in the struggle for journalistic freedom.

Chapter four looks at how global news flow contributes to the formation of a new version of Chinese identity by examining journalism and collective memory in the global-local dynamics. It redefines the meaning of Chineseness by examining three components of the new Chinese identity: 1) the transnational collaboration of Chinese people circumventing the Great Firewall; 2) the global-local exchange of news events and memories, which forms a cross-national comparison as a critique of China's current political system, calling for further reform and transition to a civilized nation built upon "universal values," contesting the pro-Communist Party vision that emphasizes "Chinese characteristics"; and 3) the development of the idea of global membership drawing upon empathy with other nations and peoples, challenging notions of nationalism in the popular discourse.

Chapter five extends upon the findings of the three previous chapters and analyzes how the three tensions worked together in a protest surrounding the journalistic community—

the *Southern Weekend* incident—that took place in January 2013 both online and offline. The central issues of the *Southern Weekend* incident were censorship and constitutionalism, which lead to the discussion of a broader implication of this study—the Chinese route of modernity. In this chapter I offset the Western origin of the concept of modernity, by showing how, since its encounter with the global powers in the mid-19th century, China has been searching for its own route to modernity. This chapter analyzes how Weibo has become a venue for offering a condensed display of the 150-year search for modernity in China, as shown in a debate over two visions of Chinese modernity that took place on Weibo. It is a debate between “Chinese characteristics” and “universal values” in discussions of China’s future, reflected in various forms of activism, online and offline. This debate reflects the intensifying conflict between the privileged and underprivileged, between state power and the rights of individual citizens, and between the authoritarian regime and the desire of democratization and constitutionalism.

In sum, this project considers how decentralized and contentious journalistic practices can empower the participants of social media to voice their opinions, in which collective memory plays an important part in online activism in support of journalistic freedom and rights of citizens. There is no question that public events are being shared, discussed and remembered on Weibo, most of which involve political criticism, particularly at moments of crisis. The dynamics on Weibo thus reflect the dynamics of a transitional society, which embraces globalization and at the same time is constrained by its political ideology, adapting to new technological revolutions yet displaying anxiety over the potential of these new technologies in challenging the political status quo.

Drawing on the role played by collective memory, this study examines how social media transform journalism conceptually and practically in conjunction with online activism, all with an eye to giving voice to anxieties about China's route to modernity. Though existing literature has primarily examined collective memory, journalism and online activism, and patterns of globalization as separate fields of inquiry, this study brings these fields together. As social media provide a space for the interweaving tensions between control and resistance, past and present, and global and local, it considers the centrality of journalism in shaping the memory of public events as a form of online activism, contesting state power and targeting various social issues in transitional moments.

2. Control and resistance: Weibo in the realm of journalism

Journalism plays a critical role in the development of Weibo. This chapter shows how the state control of media is implemented in China in the age of social media, and, in response, how various forms of resistance are made possible by journalists participating on social media platforms. These activities are important aspects of Weibo's operation, for they establish the ground from which collective memory is used in contesting contemporary social conditions and political system. In a society where the free flow of information is not legally protected, people turn to social media platforms, in which journalism has become the core of social media platforms, leading collective resistance toward various forms of state control.

This chapter does not celebrate the digital environment's emancipatory potential for repressed voices but is an attempt to complicate the control-resistance dichotomy in social media. In this chapter, I argue that the simple dichotomy of control and resistance—the means that the state uses to block the free flow of information on all media platforms and information channels, and the collective and individual activities of media professionals and users contesting these interventions—is problematic. It is problematic primarily due to the complicated power dynamics between the state and various agents of journalism—Internet companies, professional journalists, media institutions, and ordinary users of social media. The digital environment provides multiple alternative channels for news gathering and reporting, bringing individual users of social media and mobile communication to the forefront in shaping an event's narrative. This is of particular significance in the face of constraints set by the state

authority and the lack of information transparency in official channels. Within the intertwined state-market interests, Sina has positioned itself as a news provider and has intentionally built up the micro-blogging service as a news platform, making it part of the realm of journalism and facilitating the opportunity for online activism. With the platform of Weibo, journalists now regularly negotiate between their institutional and personal identities to report news events and launch criticism of the Party-state system.

This means that Weibo is positioned to address the larger tensions between the state and its citizens, and in particular to air how these tensions surface in conjunction with the ongoing debate over conflicting versions of modernity in China. Weibo provides a space where those supporting the version based on “universal values” can contest those in support of the version promoted by the Communist Party—the “Chinese characteristics.” That contest has become more visible than before, after an incident that directly targeted press freedom in 2013 was followed by a series of Party newspaper articles criticizing universal values and constitutionalism.

This analysis of the control-resistance relationship on Weibo is mainly based on interviews with people who belong to the journalistic community. In the advent of citizen participation in journalistic practices, as Kitch (2008) argues, “audiences, journalists, and critics are not as distinct from each other as we pretend, especially when we share the same cultural institutions that have shaped our collective identity.” (316) Therefore, I broadly define the journalistic community as a group of people and institutions whose work and primary concerns are related to journalism, and they are connected not only in professional practices but also on Weibo as individual users. This includes professional

journalists, media-related professionals (media critics, columnists, scholars, web editors⁷), media institutions, and those who are conventionally understood as “citizen journalists”—the on-site reporters of a news event who are by no means trained as journalists. In the Chinese context, all citizen-initiated journalistic practices are strictly monitored, and the term “citizen journalist” is also strictly prohibited in media coverage.⁸ Sina has been inviting users from the journalistic community since the beginning of Weibo, and these users play an important part in shaping what Weibo is like today.

While the journalistic community is at the core of my study, the analysis of journalism and collective memory in social media involves additional participants who are worth analyzing. I categorize the users involved in news-related topics into three layers based on their distance from the center of a news event. The first layer is the core of this study and includes journalists, on-site reporters and Sina staff in charge of news production. The second layer includes groups connected to the media—columnists, editors and producers, media researchers and media institutions. My interviews mainly focused on those who belong to the first two layers. The third layer addresses social groups that share critical views with the other two layers on the current Party-state and a vision of political reform in China. These groups of Weibo users include but are not limited to writers, scholars, lawyers, activists and business professionals, who live in China as well as overseas.

⁷ In this case I am looking at Weibo’s employees, especially its operation team.

⁸ See <http://www.nytimes.com/video/2013/05/14/opinion/100000002225772/a-long-ride-toward-a-new-china.html> for an example of a Chinese independent investigator. His activities were strictly monitored by the state. This video also shows that in China, the term “citizen journalist” (and citizen journalism) is prohibited in the public discourse.

This does not mean that there are no different opinion holders on Weibo. Weibo has come to reflect a debate on Chinese modernity that can be roughly categorized by two dominating positions—“Chinese characteristics” and “universal values.” The first one echoes the Party line about the route China should take, which also has supporters in media and among the public. The second one, although there are disagreements among them, is represented by the great majority of liberal-leaning users who are given more visibility on Weibo. However, the distinction between the two groups is not as clear as stated above. It can vary according to changing circumstances and the nature of ongoing events. As has been discussed in the introduction, the two have something in common: they both use the West as a reference point and have a projected image of the future of nation in mind. The liberal-leaning users, too, are not a homogeneous group. They could hold different opinions over certain issues, and have debates over them as well. While this study considers the two major groups that are active on Weibo, it is worth keeping in mind the complexities and variety.

2.1 Background: recent trends in Internet control in China

Weibo exists in an environment of extensive state control and a dynamic culture of resistance on the Internet. State control of the Internet in China is not only implemented through top-down regulation, such as filtering keywords from the search engine results, deleting posts, and blocking websites and services, though these are still dominant forms of content control. In both authoritarian and democratic states, the contemporary era has

seen more sophisticated Internet control, in which the government seeks to normalize its control at infrastructure, service, and content levels (Deibert *et al*, 2012).

However, the control of the Internet is not easily achieved. The rising popularity of the Internet and mobile technologies over the past two decades has threatened the government's monopoly of the information flow in China, including the state-controlled media. From the early bulletin board system (BBS) to blogs and the recent boom of social media in the Web 2.0 era, the Internet facilitates social change by creating interactive spaces in which ordinary people can obtain and create information unavailable in the state-controlled media and not favored by the government, and to play the role of citizen as they could not do so through other channels. People in this way can voice alternative and diversified opinions that mobilize collective actions. When social media play the primary role of a news platform, there are various additional ways of resisting Internet control and media censorship, as this analysis will show.

In part, my study suggests that the state's decisions about strengthening control of the Internet and mobile communications have been taken in response to recent global uprisings elsewhere in the world, where social media were thought to play an important role in mobilizing people for social movements. Access to globally popular websites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube was blocked in China by the government shortly after they were launched, for fear that the US-based services could spread "harmful" information to the regime. Events like the Arab Spring and the 2011 London riots brought to the forefront the possibility of the government taking control of all social media in China (especially the micro-blogging services) if they were used for mobilizing

social activism. It is clear that the Chinese government's fear highlights its understanding of social media's mobilization potential, which is seen as a threat to the government's goal of building a "stabilized" and "harmonious" society.

The control of social media sites has been tightening ever since. For example, in December 2011, a new regulation for Chinese micro-blogging services was issued, requiring all micro-blogging services to implement real identity verification for all users and therefore making it easier to monitor and control citizens' behavior online. While the effects of such newly implemented regulations are yet to be assessed,⁹ this study contextualizes social media (micro-blogging) in a media environment in which media outlets or services are under simultaneous pressure from both market and state.¹⁰

It is significant that the control of the Internet does not necessarily silence voices on the Internet. Instead, it responds to the increasingly sophisticated strategies employed by Internet users to bypass control mechanisms and vice versa (Marlot, 2011).¹¹ Internet control has thus created a contentious Internet culture (Yang, 2009).

This study focuses on Sina, which inhabits an unprecedented space for representing the conflicting, contesting, and competing voices in a transitional society. It is a private-owned Internet portal service company, which is viewed as a news platform by the state

⁹ As of August 2012 when I conducted the interviews in Beijing, there were no signs of the mandatory real ID registration taking effect, and Weibo users, in order to get more credibility of what they post, usually choose to have their identities verified by Sina and reveal their personal information, such as real names, locations, and occupations. Most of journalists are verified users.

¹⁰ Sina is a NASDAQ-listed company (SINA), and its services including Weibo (and other similar Internet services and companies) are also operated under the principles of market economy. However, in China, as an Internet content provider, it has to face censorship, which intervenes in the for-profit marketing model.

¹¹ A term coined by the public and scholars to describe Chinese Internet users, a combination of "net" and "citizens."

and its users. It is under the double pressures of state control and maximizing profitability in the market. The conflicting needs of market and state create odd tensions for Sina. While the Internet industry is highly marketized in China, it is still under strict control and supervision of the state because it is considered as “media.” The government does not always directly impose control methods on particular web contents. Instead, it usually implements various means of control through corporations that provide Internet services. MacKinnon (2011) points out that both global (transnational) corporations, such as Google, Microsoft and Yahoo!, and domestic companies, such as Sina, Baidu and Tencent, must submit themselves to corporate-led self-control in order to survive in the Chinese market. This pressure -- to maintain a “healthy” cyberspace environment and to grant the state’s requests to filter certain information and block certain websites and services -- has had major consequences. For example, in 2010, Google discontinued its search engine service in Mainland China, because, in Google’s view, it could not obey the Chinese government’s requirement to provide filtered search results, which went against its “corporate value.” In the long run, the stringent Internet censorship has negatively affected the corporation’s profit.¹²

As a local enterprise, Sina is under similar pressure to tighten the control of its portal website and its social media service, Weibo. The state is always attempting to exercise control over interactions on Weibo, and this control is implemented by Sina and reaches the individual level. This was recently reflected in the implementation of a series of

¹² Google decided to discontinue its Chinese search engine service in Mainland China in 2010 as a response to the Chinese government’s censorship (See MacKinnon, 2012). See the official Google blog for the statement made by David Drummond, Google’s senior vice president, <http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2010/01/new-approach-to-china.html>

regulations, including mandatory real name registration and anti-rumor campaigns and the monitoring of selected individual users (“sensitive users”¹³). My interviewees, employees from Weibo’s different departments, confirm that this has had a negative effect on its potential profitability, as illustrated in the following quote from Tom, who works for the operations department:

Weibo is considered to be Sina’s most active and profitable service. Sina has invested a huge amount of human and financial resources in Weibo, but at this time it is unclear whether Weibo will bring profits to Sina due to the threat of tightening Internet controls (Personal communication, July 25, 2012).

Similarly, his colleague from the data department, Leo, admitted that not only Sina, but also all major Internet companies in China, face the problem of how to make more profit, given that their spaces of profitability are being squeezed by pressure from the state (Personal communication, July 26, 2012). As the most important contemporary service for the Sina Company, Weibo, in the view of its employees, has been struggling too with this dilemma of profitability and political safety, both are very important for it to survive. While according to some observers, the state-implemented censorship at the corporate level could benefit the local Internet companies by securing a market with fewer foreign competitors (MacKinnon, 2012), what the Sina staff would admit weights more on them is that the tightening state control squeezes their space of profitability from Weibo.

¹³ These users are usually considered as threats to the Party-state for their dissent opinions.

This chapter unpacks the role of journalism mediating between control and resistance through two primary agents—the Internet company (Sina) as a news platform and Weibo users in the journalistic community. Weibo is part of the landscape of journalism, in which the journalistic community, together with other citizens, pushes for more openness and freedom of information flow, and explore the potential for online activism.

2.2 “Making news”: the double identities of Sina as a news platform

As a news platform, Weibo tries to meet the expectations of both the state and the market. In order to do so, Sina has to maintain a good relationship with the state bureaus and to fully understand state preferences regarding news coverage, especially the bottom line of state censorship. At the same time, Sina’s established competitive edge of online news-making paved the way for the development of Weibo as a news platform for alternative information and opinions, a situation that Sina has used to full advantage in pushing Weibo’s partial autonomy as a news platform for bottom-up, individual-based news making. In consequence, Weibo has attracted large numbers of users with active participation of journalistic practices.

The state views Internet companies, especially portal websites, as news organizations, even though none of these websites are allowed to have their own journalists covering stories. Meanwhile, Sina is self-identified as a news provider, operating within the complexity of state-corporate relations and trying to present itself as an alternative news channel for its users. As this chapter shows, when compared with other major portal websites and services, Sina is particularly good at online news making, which brings

more visitors and readership. But this has also made it a good target for censorship and other forms of control.

A balanced position in the state-corporate relations

For traditional media journalists, the state control of Weibo is in line with the censorship that they encounter daily in the newsroom. One former journalist, Crystal, who worked for a weekly financial newspaper, complained, “The notices of prohibitions are just endless. I cannot stand this.” (Personal communication, August 30, 2012) Media censorship that works for traditional media extends to the online space of Weibo, targeting individual users, especially those self-identified as journalists. Crystal complained that on Weibo all her posts about the thunderstorm in Beijing (July 21 Beijing Thunderstorm) were deleted, and “it seems that this time the control is much more strict than before.” (Weibo post, July 31, 2012) Similarly, Oscar, an investigative journalist, described the notices of prohibition issued by the state as “disgusting.” (Personal communication, July 24, 2012)

Notices of prohibition is a form of direct communication between the Party-state and media institutions, including news websites, in that the propaganda officials of the CCP explicitly instruct news outlets what kind of stories they are allowed to cover. Following a prohibition, relevant departments at Sina typically must delete posts and filter keywords related to the prohibited topics, or at least stop promoting relevant topics. While journalists and other users blame Sina for deleting their posts and taking actions against their Weibo accounts, Sina employees complained that,

Sina does not want to delete their posts or accounts. We have shared interests with our users! We need them to be active in Weibo so that we will have a larger number of visits, which is key to the survival of a website. But we also have to (delete), as it is enforced by the state (Tom, Personal communication, July 25, 2012).

This comment illustrates that Sina, as a news provider, has been making efforts to balance its political and economic interests. On the one hand, the strengthening of content control could draw its users away from Weibo, that is, the failure of its market. On the other hand, if Sina does not implement control at the levels deemed appropriate by the state, its survival is threatened. Individual employees at Sina thus have to be very careful in their daily maintenance of Weibo contents, especially topics related to news and current affairs.

While Sina, like other media outlets and Internet companies, has to put up with intensifying state control, it also develops strategies to protect its leading position as an online news provider and Weibo as the leading micro-blogging service. As there is no standard or consensus of when and how state control is implemented, Sina has made use of this unpredictability to maximize Weibo's public influence as a news platform and maintain political safety in the media market.

Local jurisdiction at Weibo

The dynamics on Weibo reflect attempts to find a consensus among the state, the company (Sina), and Weibo users, a major responsibility of Sina. Tom, from Weibo's operations department who used to work at the portal's news channel, commented:

The underlying interests are very complicated and vary case by case, so Sina has to find the right position in each case. However, even though no clear consensus can be made each time, Sina uses a general principle to determine which posts/accounts need to be deleted or filtered: to identify where the event takes place, and the target of the public's criticism in an event (Personal communication, July 25, 2012).

I call this general principle “local jurisdiction” of media outlets, which applies to all media institutions, and it plays a significant role in Sina's decision about when and how to take appropriate action on Weibo. As Chinese media outlets have to register themselves with a local government (usually at municipal and provincial levels), media outlets cannot easily criticize the local governments where they get registered in their reports. Although the Party-state does not welcome voices of criticism, especially the questioning of its legitimacy, it has a certain level of tolerance so long as the criticism is directed toward a local government that does not host the involved media outlets (including Internet companies). People like Tom, who was an experienced online news editor at the portal website before working for Weibo, are very familiar with this principle and its variations. News making in traditional media and Internet portals requires journalists and editors to abide by the rule of local jurisdiction of media outlets and to avoid criticism of the “inappropriate” target.

At the central Party-state level, three main organizations are in charge of media-related activities and issues – the Central Propaganda Department of the Communist Party, the State Council Information Office, and the State Internet Information Office (a special

organization in charge of Internet affairs affiliated with the State Council). These three organizations—“the big three,” as they are often called by Sina employees—work together to regulate media practitioners at local levels, but they do not directly intervene in the activities of individual media organizations. Instead, they establish local bureaus to directly supervise newspapers, television/radio stations, and Internet services registered at a particular location to interact with local media institutions at proper level. Sina, for example, is registered in Beijing and thus resides under the direct supervision of the Beijing bureau of the big three (Tom, personal communication, July 25, 2012).

Whenever an event takes place, the local bureaus of the “big three” identify whose interests are involved and which local government will be the target of the public’s criticism, before they make a decision of whether to issue notices of prohibition. For example, multiple posts related to a thunderstorm in Beijing, July 21, 2012, in which 77 people died, were deleted soon after being posted, as explained by Crystal:

Recently what have been mostly deleted were posts related to the thunderstorm in Beijing. All posts criticizing the Beijing government for its lack of responsibility in urban planning, especially the city’s drainage system, were killed. This is because Sina is under the jurisdiction of the Beijing bureau of the Party-state organizations in charge of news and media regulation (Personal communication, August 30, 2012).

Because Sina is counted as a media company in Beijing under the direct supervision of the Beijing bureau of the “big three,” criticism was seen as a threat to the Beijing municipal government. It is highly risky for Sina to allow such kind of tweets. This is

similar to the practices in traditional media, in which a local media outlet cannot do a story critical of the government where it is registered. Weibo, too, as far as the Sina employees and journalists are concerned, follows this rule. As an illustration of how it works, Tom, from the operations team, compares the different ways the team handled the posts on the Beijing Thunderstorm and the “Shifang Incident,” a mass protest in June 2012 against the launching of a big copper processing plant for fear of environmental pollution in a small city in Sichuan Province:

As you can see, Sina has different strategies for dealing with similar public incidents. When the protest in Shifang took place, it also generated numerous posts on Weibo, but unlike the thunderstorm in Beijing, most of the posts about the protest were not deleted. Why? Because the criticism did not directly violate the interests of Beijing or the central government of China. Shifang is just a small city in Sichuan Province, where the level of penetration of Weibo is relatively low. Its influence cannot be compared with a public event in Beijing, or something that threatens the interests of the central government (Personal communication, July 25, 2012).

Therefore, it is Sina, especially the operations team of Weibo that has to make the decision to silence a topic in order to survive. To make that decision, individuals on the operations team have to be very sensitive to the nature of the event, monitoring its development and broader social impact, trying to find out the underlying interests involved, waiting to see if the decision is consistent with the state. These employees are

very experienced news workers, so they have the kind of grounded knowledge that helps them make decisions.

Sina is not an exceptional case in terms of local jurisdiction of the media. Oscar, an investigative journalist, said that in the winter of 2011 his tweets on the mass movement in Wukan village (the Wukan Incident)¹⁴ were all deleted from the micro-blog service of Tencent, another major Internet company in China,¹⁵ because the village is located in Guangdong Province, where Tencent's headquarters are located. His posts that had the same contents on Weibo, however, were allowed (Personal communication, July 24, 2012).

In addition to the interests of local governments, media coverage cannot violate the interests of the central government, and this includes tweets on Weibo. If the target of the public's criticism in a news event is related to the central government, relevant topics and posts will be identified and deleted. Usually, the underlying interests are not so straightforwardly present, so it takes time for the "big three" and the media institutions to watch for the development of an event and make decision. For example, following the July 23 High-speed Railway Accident, it took a week for the "the big three" to make a decision to delete posts on Weibo and impose strict media censorship. This time lag gave Weibo much leeway in spreading the news to a wider public. As Tom explains,

Because this accident seemed very complicated, they (the big three) could not find what the target of the public's criticism was and did not issue any

¹⁴ This is a seven-month mass movement regarding the land property in a village in the southern Guangdong Province.

¹⁵ Sina's major competitor in micro-blogging service in China

prohibitions during the first few days. Once they identified that the major target was the Minister of Railways, an official ministry of the central government, they started taking actions a week later (Personal communication, July 25, 2012).

This explains why in the beginning Sina allowed tweets on the July 23 high-speed railway accident, including very harsh criticism of governmental bureaus at all levels, which established Weibo as an information center for breaking news and investigation. Once the target of the criticism was identified, “the big three” issued notices of prohibition to protect the central government’s interests. It also implies that if the interests of the central government or the Party-state system are threatened as the target of public criticism, controls will be increasingly tightened. However, the principle of local jurisdiction of media is only a basic guideline, for in practice more complicated processes of decision-making are needed for Sina employees at different levels.

Weibo as an alternative news platform

Despite the fact that Weibo is under the pressure of state control, it still maintains partial autonomy as an important part of journalism in China. According to its employees in the operations team, their work is very similar to news editors, except that it is more interactive and personal. They sometimes need to contact on-site users to verify information, or use personal connections with journalists to promote certain topics. The competitive edge of Weibo in the market of Chinese social media lies in its ability to provide real time news updates and follow-ups with multiple perspectives. This is an

inheritance from Sina's online news making, as explained by Tom, who had five years working experience as a web editor in Sina's news channels before he joined Weibo.

“Doing the news work” has been a tradition at Sina ever since it was launched as a portal website, despite the fact that in China Internet companies are not permitted to have their own staff doing news reporting. What we do for the news channel (the portal) is selecting stories from traditional media, making headlines and editing the stories to make sure that they are attractive to our readers, while maintaining good relationships with media outlets and the state, so that we can always secure the resources as a news provider in China (Personal communication, July 25, 2012).

Sina has achieved a high level of professional conduct in online news making, so that its competitors have had to follow its lead. Traditional media institutions often want to see their news stories picked up by Sina, because it helps them reach nationwide readership. In order to keep business running like other media outlets, Sina has learned the state's preference in news selection and maintains a good relationship with the Beijing bureau of the big three. In this way, Sina has become the leading online news provider.

These advantages have been inherited by Sina's micro-blogging service, Weibo, now considered the most important component of the company. Sina's tradition as a news provider contributes to Weibo's popularity. According to Sina employee David from the operations team,

Sina's good relationships with media outlets have enabled Weibo to secure a solid user base, as we could invite journalists and other media-related

professionals to join when it was first launched in 2009 (Personal communication, July 25, 2012).

This indicates that Sina is intentionally promoting Weibo as a news platform. Sina has been actively recruiting journalists as Weibo users ever since it was launched. Journalists thus have become an important component of Weibo's user base. By allowing journalists to have their voices on this platform, Sina reinforces its image as a news provider, which indeed brings about more active participation. As Tom said,

Weibo's potential for profitability lies in its public influence, which is gained through the number of visits and active interactions. But how to increase these? It is determined by how much Weibo engages in news reporting (Personal communication, July 25, 2012).

Therefore, maintaining the image of Weibo as an alternative news platform with a certain degree of journalistic autonomy is very important for Sina to attract a significant number of frequent and active users. The year of 2011 was generally considered Weibo's golden age, because of the news events in which it actively engaged. A significant moment for Weibo as a news platform was the 2011 earthquake in Japan, as David, from the operations team, recalled,

During that time, a lot of our colleagues in the operations team were called to the office to work overtime, collecting posts and making banners and topic pages for the Weibo website. First we needed to confirm whether the news was true. We searched the existing posts to see how many posts containing the word 'earthquake' we could find, and whether there was a huge amount of them

within a short period of time. After we confirmed it was true, we differentiated between the users who were on site and those who were not. After identifying those people on site, we contacted some of them personally and included them on the topic page, suggesting that Weibo users who were concerned about the earthquake follow them (Personal communication, July 25, 2012).

In the section where Weibo listed on-site users on the topic page, there were four categories -- ordinary Chinese citizens in Japan, journalists dispatched from China to cover the earthquake story, the official Weibo account of media that covered the story, and experts with expertise on relevant topics such as earthquakes, nuclear disasters, and media. In this way, Weibo participated in extensive media coverage of the event, and, as a news platform, it put effort into integrating and highlighting important information and sources for its users. This was a remarkable collaboration between professional journalists and ordinary citizens that produced such a large-scale “live broadcasting” of breaking news.

The July 23 High-speed Railway Accident is considered to be another remarkable moment for Weibo. A wide range of users started to recognize Weibo as a news platform instead of an online social tool. The operations team of Weibo played a key role in promoting the topic of the accident, as recalled by David:

I was on my shift the night when the accident happened. I would say it was definitely the turning point of Weibo’s role in China. In the beginning, I contacted journalists who were on site or on their way to Wenzhou (where the accident took place). They all have Weibo accounts and were doing instant

updates via Weibo, so we could see what they were posting and knew what happened. My duty was to let all the Weibo users know what was happening in time by verifying the posts emerging on Weibo with on-site journalists and other individuals and asking them to keep posting. *This was very important for us as a news platform.* After a week, we received a call from an official that prohibited us from following up on this accident. However, a week was sufficient for us to make it publicly visible and influential. Although there is control, as the operators of the website we are able to do our best and make the most out of the resources we have (*italics by the author*) (Personal communication, July 25, 2012).

The above quote shows that those who work for Weibo, especially in the operations team, recognize themselves as an integral part of journalism. While they have to abide by the state's decisions to censor a topic or not, Sina still has the flexibility and partial autonomy to decide which topics to promote. This partial autonomy facilitates the dissemination of news and opinions to a wider range of users and the general public within the limits set by the state.

A seemingly greater degree of journalistic freedom channels more individualized, citizen-based news reporting. For journalists, the news platform of Weibo is different from the traditional media they work for, or even from Sina's portal website. Robert, a journalist who is now vice editor-in-chief of a weekly magazine, said, "We journalists view it (Weibo) as an alternative channel for news reporting." (Personal communication, July 23, 2012)

In the eyes of journalists, Weibo is also significantly different from other similar social media platforms. Oscar, who has Weibo accounts at both Sina and Tencent, said, “The users (on the two platforms) are different. Those on Tencent, they are just kids.”¹⁶ (Personal communication, July 24, 2012) Another user, George, a former investigative journalist and now a professor, said, “my followers at Tencent Weibo ... are younger and are not as concerned about news-related topics as those at Sina” (Personal communication, August 21, 2012). Therefore, the choice of a micro-blogging service is a way of expressing one’s unique identity—a way of belonging to a group with authority to interpret news events, and, more importantly, being able to play the role of a citizen. Sina’s focus on bringing people from the journalistic community to join Weibo and its users’ active engagement in news events on Weibo attract more users who are concerned with current affairs and news. This makes Weibo unique among all the micro-blogging services. In return, the consolidation of the journalistic community establishes Weibo’s brand of journalism as the first choice of social media platform for updating the latest information on breaking news events.

Sina’s dilemma as a news platform

Sina constantly faces conflicting interests. The active engagement in news events that can attract more users can get Sina into trouble, and now Sina receives more pressure from the state. Therefore, Sina had to find a balanced position, as David from the operations team explained:

¹⁶ The user base of Tencent Weibo is based on the users of QQ, an online instant messaging software developed by Tencent in 1999. These users are mainly young people, including teenagers and college students.

Sina is definitely pursuing maximized profits and commercial interests, but such a goal could be in conflict with the interests of the state... and the baseline for Sina is, when we are notified that a certain topic cannot be touched, we no longer push it to the forefront. Otherwise, we will keep doing whatever we can (Personal communication, July 25, 2012).

While Sina considers Weibo's engagement in journalistic practices as key to its popularity and profitability, the reality, however, is not often bright. In recent years, when several public events became news and were widely discussed on Weibo, they profoundly changed how the issues surrounding the events were solved and generated further criticism of the Party-state. Weibo was then the target of a huge amount of pressure from the government. State intervention reached a climax in April 2012, with a temporary suspension of Weibo's comment function for three days. The tightening state control put Weibo, as a news platform, in an unfavorable position in the current Party-state-led media system. As David commented,

This (the temporary suspension of the comment function) is a sign that we need to change, and maybe become something like Facebook, focusing on social networking and sharing of everyday life, rather than "doing news work" as we are now. Control is getting tighter, and it is very hard for us to continue this way, so we attempted to introduce more entertainment topics and promote topics about everyday life. However, our attempt turned out to be a failure. Our users still expect us to provide news (Personal communication, July 25, 2012).

Sina's leading position among all the major Chinese portals in online news and Weibo's popularity due to its coverage of news events make it difficult to shift to do social networking that focuses on making friends and sharing daily lives. If Weibo stopped being an alternative channel and platform in which news events are shared and fermented,¹⁷ it would lose its public influence and thus competitive edge in the market, as David admitted,

If we didn't 'do news work,' if there isn't any exciting news to stir us up, Weibo is going to die. A social media site should look like Facebook, but China is always an unusual case. Our users need a news channel and platform for them to voice their opinions (because there is no other way to get them out), which is not the case in the U.S. Because of this, Sina's executives still want to stick to this role to be part of journalism (Personal communication, July 25, 2012).

This suggests that although being part of the realm of journalism is what makes Sina and its Weibo service succeed in the Chinese media market, its employees and even executives consider the emphasis on news an exceptional case specific to China. They believe that social networking is safe compared to being involved in journalism. The lack of channels for the free flow of information leaves Weibo as the primary alternative channel for news making. However, in order to keep its competitive edge in the Chinese media market, Sina has to negotiate with the state to keep its business running.

¹⁷ Journalists and media users on Weibo also use the term "ferment" to describe how an event is discussed on Weibo, spreads to a larger network, gets more attention, and results in further influence.

In sum, Weibo belongs to the realm of journalism and is thus subject to the state control of news media. The state is implementing increasingly strident and sophisticated methods of control, but the methods vary case by case and at different levels (institution, content, and individual users). The basic principle of local jurisdiction of media can only be used as a guideline. Detailed examination of each event and the interests involved is required every time.

This forces Sina to continually negotiate that delicate balance between profitability and political safety in order to survive in the contemporary Chinese media industry. In particular, Weibo's unique position as a news platform places it at the center of producing and fermenting news and gives it a unique function for the participatory journalistic community and citizens, producing interpretations of news that can compete with official discourses. Paradoxically, in order to protect this advantage, Sina has to maintain a good relationship with the state, and therefore it needs to be careful to make sure that the contents on Weibo are maintained at a level within the state's tolerance.

2.3 Journalists' institutional and personalized identities

As a news platform created by Sina, Weibo provides a space for journalism to negotiate its boundaries with the state bureaus. On this platform, journalists exercise institutional and personalized identities in response to state control. Switching identities becomes a useful tool for journalists to develop strategies of resistance using Weibo, which creates opportunities for online activism.

Different kinds of journalism are blended on Weibo, as its users report, share and remember public events in many ways. Journalists in traditional media institutions

actively bridge the gap between traditional media and social media news platforms, and this process changes the role of journalism in a transitional society. Journalists' affiliation with media institutions grants them a certain level of public influence and authority, with a verifiable identity, an established professional network, and thus a larger numbers of followers on Weibo than ordinary users. Their presence makes possible a larger audience for non-journalists on the site, who might use journalists' followers to spread their own firsthand reports to a wider public. At the same time, journalists participate in the non-institutional and personalized news production on Weibo as on-site witnesses and first-hand reporters, which enable them to shape the story differently from that of institutionalized journalistic practices. Because of their on-site and instantaneous information updates and personal eyewitness accounts, their posts are spread widely in a very short time, and to a large extent they shape the core of many news stories. This double identity on the part of journalists is significant as part of online activism, facilitating collective resistance to censorship and other means of media control.

The melting boundary of journalism opens up additional channels for news reporting, inviting alternative authorities who can compete with the official, institutionalized news voices, and this happens particularly in conjunction with sourcing practices. Although the diversified sourcing practices common to new media forms (Curran, 2010) and non-elite channels (Atton and Wickenden, 2005) are by no means a recent phenomenon, they are worth noticing in the context of Weibo and Chinese social media as a response to the lack of open, transparent, and credible sources that is readily displayed on state-controlled media. Robert, a former journalist and now the vice editor-in-chief of a financial magazine, noted:

Now, Weibo is almost the only platform for information exchange on major news events in recent years. To some extent, it even becomes a substitute for daily newspapers in terms of news updates (Personal communication, July 23, 2012).

The unwillingness of the state bureaus to open themselves to media and public inquiries on public events forces journalists and concerned citizens to rely on social media, such as Weibo, for alternatively sourced information. In China, the state has often been the last platform to release information on events with elements of crisis. This facilitates the success of alternative channels of information in new media forms. For example, in 2003, during the SARS epidemic, there was no concrete information from official channels being publicized in traditional media until more than a month after the outbreak of the disease in Beijing. The lack of transparency led to the popularity of unconfirmed text messages and alternative information sources through the Internet and mobile phones (e.g., Tai & Sun, 2007).

On Weibo, the gap between the public's right to know and the slow and reluctant reaction of the government provides space for alternative sourcing practices. The sources for journalists, according to Tony, an editor-in-chief of a magazine, are "not professionals in a specific field, but those who possess some expertise in that field" (Personal communication, July 24, 2012). Or, as Robert commented, "they are closest to the site where things are happening, or have personal connections to the event or people involved" (Personal communication, July 23, 2012). These people are not only the source for journalists, but they also report first-hand information by themselves. When first

reporting an event on Weibo, they attract public attention by declaring a certain kind of authority: either they are on site, or they have close connections with the key persons involved.

There are different layers of authority upon which a news event is constructed – “citizen journalists,” traditional media, and state officials. The non-journalist and non-institutional sources are considered “citizen journalists” by journalists working for media institutions. While the “citizen journalists” could form narratives that can compete and challenge the professional journalistic accounts, the platform of Weibo shows that “citizen journalists” are recognized to have more important role in shaping a news story, and they usually need to collaborate rather than compete. For example, a protest in August 2011, in the city of Dalian, northeast China, against the running of a PX chemical factory, was made publicly known with the help of non-journalists—the citizens of Dalian. One of my interviewees, Phoebe, a Dalian native, participated in the information relay on Weibo.

We didn’t know there was a toxic chemical plant until a typhoon hit Dalian and damaged the protective dykes of that factory. Then we heard that the breach of the protective dyke might cause a leak of chemicals into the sea and thus threaten the safety of the city. I looked up ‘PX’ online, and found that it was a dangerous chemical product for people’s health. Then I found on Weibo that people had started to protest in front of the city hall, but it was too late and there were already so many people that incoming traffic was not allowed any more. So I used Weibo to collaborate with people on site, helping them send messages out and calling for wider public attention. I reposted photos

and videos and reported that the special police had started to use violence that evening (Personal communication, July 28, 2012).

This is how the news of the protest was known outside the city of Dalian, which then became a nationwide topic on Weibo and attracted global media. Although the tweets about Dalian were deleted very quickly, because of the fast updates and wide-ranging participation, it generated a wider audience and reached media institutions. Finally the Dalian official had to announce a cancellation of the chemical plant.¹⁸ In this fashion, alternative sourcing channels and bottom-up sourcing practices are changing the authority structure of Chinese news reporting, including how an event is constructed, what it looks like, and what is remembered about it, as Robert explained:

Citizen journalists react to an event first. They take photos and write short sentences and post on Weibo immediately. Traditional journalists react (to the event) after that. They can no longer be the first to report, but most of the time, they have to rely on the first-hand accounts (of citizen journalists). The government's reaction is the slowest and most passive. Due to the lack of transparency in the government's information processing and the state-owned media's perceived low credibility, the public tends to believe what it gets from citizen journalists or on-site witnesses, and its posts are reposted quickly and widely. Further, even though first-hand information is not always correct or accurate, people still tend to believe it, because they don't trust the government and the state-owned media anymore. No matter what efforts [by the official and

¹⁸ However, as Phoebe told me, the factory is still running secretly as of the time she was interviewed.

state media] are made to clarify later, even if their information turns out to be true, people just don't believe it (Personal communication, July 23, 2012).

Therefore, the state is at the periphery of reporting and interpreting a news event when it becomes a hot topic on Weibo. As traditional media institutions pass on and filter information from Weibo, they no longer have the privilege of being the first to report. Moreover, they have little influence over what an event looks like in the eyes of the public – at least in the eyes of Weibo users. In this way, a news event can be remembered with the three layers of contributions to the shaping of a story, and the core of this event is shaped by the personal accounts.

While “citizen journalists” are at the core of shaping the story of a news event, Chinese journalists use the term citizen journalists as an imprecise translation from its original meaning. I argue that, in the Chinese context, this taken-for-granted adoption is inaccurate, because the while on-site, non-professional, and spontaneous capturing of an ongoing news event could post significant level of competition to traditional journalists, it needs to reach a significant level of public attention to be recognized as newsworthy, which requires the co-presence, collaboration, and opinion leadership of professional journalists. One effective strategy of drawing more attention to a first-hand report is to mention journalists when on-site users first post on Weibo.¹⁹ Therefore, these tweets result in a large number of retweets long before the official release of the news, because they draw the attention of “famous people” (celebrities, experts in relevant fields, and

¹⁹ This is a function similar to Twitter's “mention”. If a user wants a particular post to be seen by a certain user, he or she can use the sign @ followed by the ID to mention that user. Here “at” is used as a verb in Chinese. For example, we say “I will @ (AT) you,” or “I just ATed you in my Weibo post.”

journalists) who have verified identity and large numbers of followers. When the reposts reach a significant number, their influence exceeds that of the state. People tend to believe information first-hand, even if unverified. According to Sina employees David and Tom, when a post reaches 10,000 retweets, they consider it a newsworthy topic. Although this threshold is quite arbitrary, it is applied to various news events (Personal communication, July 25, 2012).

The fast speed and wide range of information updates enable the individual social media users to contest official sources and censorship. Because of the speed of communication, journalists and other users on site have sufficient time and resources to reach the public, pushing traditional media to follow up before notices of prohibition come from the state. For example, in the coverage of the July 23 High-speed Railway Accident, it took a week for the Central Department of Propaganda to issue a notice of prohibition on this topic to all media outlets. During that week, because of the extensive coverage on Weibo and the follow-up of traditional media, the event became so prominent that notices of prohibition could not stop the stories from being further discussed on Weibo. Although the print media were forced to cancel stories that were already in press, the discussion and further questioning of the accident continued, even several months later. On Weibo, journalists and media institutions continued posting on the topic, declaring that they would never stop querying as to the real cause of the accident and mourning for the victims who did not receive proper remembrance and compensation. As @jizhedejia (reporter home, a journalism website) posted, “You can silence the people and silence all (micro-) blogs, but you cannot stop our mourning.”(July 29, 2011) Even though these posts were deleted soon, users continued posting, keeping the event visible. As the following chapter will

also show, reference to the “July 23 Accident” appeared quite frequently whenever similar incidents took place.

Significantly, personalized journalistic practices on Weibo often compete with the official interpretations of news events and put pressure on traditional media and the state authorities. A journalist can establish personal authority on Weibo, separated from the media institution for which he/she works. This in turn generates pressures on traditional media to challenge the limits set by censorship.

It is no surprise that journalists facing constraints in their daily news production thus turn to Weibo. When traditional media are not allowed to cover a story, journalists who are already on site choose to post what they get on Weibo, including interviews, photos, and personal opinions. The frequent issuing of notices of prohibition from the state largely constrains journalists in traditional media in what they can cover, but Weibo naturally becomes an important venue for them to continue reporting, even though it is a dangerous endeavor. Crystal, a journalist who used to work for a leading financial newspaper in China, recalled her first experience of using Weibo for news reporting. She was assigned to cover the story of a seemingly strange accident, in which a heavy truck crushed the village head in early 2011 (The Case of Qian Yunhui, or the Yueqing Incident).²⁰

[After we arrived,] we were notified (by the head of our newspaper) that no further media coverage was allowed (by the officials). I couldn’t write the story

²⁰ The man who was killed was Qian Yunhui, a village head, who was said to have helped the villagers to protect their rights. When the photo of the accident site was uploaded to Weibo, people believed that it must have been a murder, not just a traffic accident, even though the court decision affirmed that it was an accident (The Case of Qian Yunhui, or Yueqing Incident).

any more. But I got the material anyway, so I posted it on Weibo. I uploaded the videos I shot with my cellphone, and it took several days to finish the uploading (Personal communication, August 30, 2012).

She then became the primary source for the news story. She uploaded photos, interviews, and a video she took with her mobile phone to Weibo as first-hand materials, establishing authority over the event, even though she could not write the story for the newspaper at which she worked. The story soon became a major topic of discussion on Weibo, where it subsequently led to more investigations, a local governmental press conference, and a hearing in the local court.

Using the social media platform of Weibo and mobile devices on site, journalists are thus able to send unfiltered information to the public during breaking news and other major topical events. George, a former journalist, who is now a professor in journalism, used an example to show how it works:

During the chaotic situation after the July 23 Railway Accident, a large number of journalists went to the site to report on it, but there were many constraints on what they could report. When Premiere Wen Jiabao visited the accident site and made a speech, the television stations in the Mainland were not allowed to do live broadcasts. Knowing this, the journalists were all posting Wen's speech on Weibo word by word, delivering a "live broadcast" on site, although not every word in Wen's speech appeared in the traditional media (Personal communication, August 21, 2012).

In this way, the public was able to know exactly what Wen said about this accident without it being filtered by traditional media. The live broadcasting (posting) on Weibo by journalists on site put great pressure on the traditional media and the state to follow up. Oscar, an investigative reporter, also talked about his experience covering a forced house demolition incident in Yihuang, Jiangxi Province (the Yihuang Incident), in which one of the victim's family members was threatening self-immolation. The whole story was live tweeted by the youngest member of the family with a smart phone and Weibo account and followed by many journalists. As Oscar noted:

At that time, I was in my office at Beijing, receiving information from my colleagues on site. When journalists were doing on-site reporting, something unexpected happened so they had to use Weibo to do live reporting simultaneously. [The live tweet was] watched by tens of millions of people simultaneously on Weibo, putting great pressure on the local government to take actions (Personal communication, July 24, 2012).

This event then received nationwide media attention and, afterwards, became a model for reporting similar incidents, making the violence in the forced house demolition a prominent issue for the public and the state. The live posts pressured the traditional media to follow up the story and the relevant departments of state to take action over the issue.

These examples illustrate a new mode of journalism that contributes to online activism. The double-identity of journalists breaks the boundary between professional, institutionalized journalism and the participatory, spontaneous activities of personalized journalism, pushing traditional media to follow up for fear of losing readership. This

double identity further challenges the conventional division of professional and citizen journalism, which are inseparable from each other. “Citizen journalism,” the non-journalistic coverage in China, has become a significant competitor of professional journalism, but it does not challenge the established professional journalism. Instead, it provides sources for professional journalism. Together, they collaborate to pressure state authorities. Professional journalists, for their part, engage in personalized journalistic practices in situations where their professional identities prevent them from distributing the story to the public. With their personal reports, they can break through the “prohibited areas” of news reports, making an event known to the public and pressuring the government. As journalist Fly, who does reports related to officials, commented, “We take a bottom-up approach to Weibo that forces the traditional media to cross the perceived baseline of censorship and forces the officials to respond to public inquiries” (Personal communication, August 29, 2012). In this way, Weibo is not merely an alternative channel for journalists to post first-hand materials when they face censorship. What is more important is its impact on traditional media and the state, in that it drives a more open and transparent environment for freely flowing information through collaboration of journalists and non-journalists that invites collective actions targeting the Party-state authorities in this platform.

2.4. Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed Weibo as a contentious space, in which journalists and Internet companies maneuver complicated interests to contest the state control of media. Sina as an online news medium provides an alternative news platform, Weibo, which becomes

part of the work of journalism in the Chinese context. Sina has to maintain a collaborative relationship with the state and implements appropriate methods of content control on Weibo. More specifically, the state adopts the notion of local jurisdiction, applying to the operation of social media sites and the entire online news service, which determines whether certain topics and users have to be deleted. Other than this, there is no written or strictly settled rule for what kinds of content are allowed on Weibo. Therefore, Weibo's operations are uncertain: While possessing a certain degree of freedom as a news platform and channeling alternative voices on topical events, they maintain a balanced position between the needs of the market and the state. Sina thus is engaged in an ongoing struggle to survive as a news provider in between the forces of politics and the market, which take on singular characteristics in the Chinese context.

Journalists creatively take on dual identities as a way to resist state control. Journalists working for traditional media need to rely on the authority they established in their institutions, but these same journalists opt for Weibo as a more personalized mode of news reporting. Just like Sina has to maintain a balance between profitability and political safety, journalists also have to ensure that their personal, independent position as news providers is different from the official discourse, but at the same time they cannot deviate too much from their institutional affiliations. This dual identity leads to a melting boundary of various journalistic practices, making the division between professional and citizen journalism problematic in the Chinese context.

The dilemma of Internet companies and the dual identity of journalists have significant implications on online activism. Although Sina is the provider of a platform and

technologies to run its micro-blogging service, its staff actively engages in news events, using the relative autonomy to collaborate with journalists and promote certain topics. The shifting authority structure in journalism and the transferrable identities of journalists push the limit of censorship, exploring more spaces to mobilize citizen participation and collective action against the state power.

This study acknowledges Weibo's contribution as a news platform in which journalists negotiate with the state and media institutions for their boundaries, leading to a shifting of authority in news making, diversity of sourcing, and thrust for the free flow of information. However, this study only captures a moment when Weibo has been able to maintain its partial autonomy despite state control. In the past few months, particularly during China's leadership transition in November 2012, I observed a shift in the focus of hot topics highlighted by Sina on Weibo's website, which has begun to gear increasingly toward a politically safer topic—entertainment. Although it is too early to tell, this trend suggests that the interactions on Weibo remain subject to an unstable political atmosphere. That fact underscores both the unpredictability of state control over media of all types in China and journalism's need for flexibility in adapting to a changing landscape.

3. Past and present: collective memory in the age of social media

How have social media transformed the way we remember public events and how collective memories are used for the present? What is the role of journalism in such a transformation? This chapter looks at collective memory itself, through the changing past-present relationship displayed in social media. The central inquiry of this chapter is driven by the paradoxical relationship between a transient, instantaneous information update of “now” and a need for storage, preservation and passing on the information of “then.” As this chapter shows, the past provides various cultural resources and frameworks to contest the present.

The past-present relation is reflected in the formation of collective memory through various mnemonic practices. Collective memory is here understood as the representation of a particular past event with images and narratives for present use, by social groups at different scales (community, national, and global). Collective memory serves present needs, but it works only when the past has meaning in itself. This study focuses on how the past can be used as cultural resources for the present, particularly through practices with journalism at their core. In order to explore them, I differentiate between two kinds of past that are used on Weibo. One is the “remote past,” meaning historical events with a considerable temporal distance from the present, institutionalized in the forms of textbooks, museums, memorials, and public commemorations. Being institutionalized does not mean that these events are without controversy. Their meanings are still debatable and are open for new evidence and interpretations. For example, in this study, the anti-Japanese War in China (1931-1945) during World War Two, the Chinese Civil War (1946-1949), the Great Chinese Famine during the early 1960s, the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and the Tiananmen student movement in 1989 all count as a

“remote past.” There are official versions of these events, but all of them are still producing public controversies and debates as shown on Weibo. This means that they are not only discussed as past events per se but are more importantly also invoked in the discussion of current news.

The other one is the “instantaneous past,” meaning a particular event that happened just now and faded away from the public’s attention in a short period of time. It involves the daily practices of capturing and archiving specific news events by ordinary social media users as well as journalists while the events are unfolding. For example, the high-speed railway accident in a southeast city Wenzhou, July 2011 is a special moment in which details were collected, posted by ordinary Weibo users, and then archived. Soon, it turned into a past event that could be referenced when later similar incidents took place. In social media, the storage of the past is fluid, hardly distinctive from the ongoing present. For the sake of this study, especially the analysis of individual public events, I still keep this distinction. My analysis will show how the two kinds of past contribute to the understanding of public events in social media, particularly as it takes shape around crisis.

The advent of electronic and digital media and the networked society speed up the change in how we remember. Things are archived easily with portable digital devices and are forgotten quickly. Huyssen (1995) points out that Western culture has an obsession with memory, which is connected with the development of media technologies, as these technologies bring about the quick oblivion of events that people experienced via them. In this sense, while social media bring about more opportunities for remembering with

the convenience of storage, archiving, and sharing, there are also concerns that the acceleration of time brought about by technologies could also speed up forgetting.

This chapter concerns how social media change the way collective memory operates in journalism. Lang and Lang (1989) were the first to put forward the relationship between news and collective memory. They point out that the past provides convenient divisions, yardsticks, and shorthand explanations for the present in the news. The past provides an interpretive framework for the present, in the form of commemoration, historical analogy, and historical context for the present event (Edy, 1999). However, the past is not only a resource that can be picked up by journalists to make sense of the present, but journalists can also make use of the past to serve present purposes. As Zelizer (2010) puts it, journalism, whether in the form of words or images, enables the invocation of past events in mobilizing public opinion and encouraging public engagement. Journalists possess a strong sensitivity to the temporal dimension of news not only because of the requirement of timeliness in news reporting, but also because of the authority they establish as they define the collective memory of an event being covered (Zelizer, 1992). For example, in the U.S. context, as Kitch (2002) points out, journalism is at the forefront of creating and recalling collective memory, which grants journalists a cultural authority in defining national memory and the position of public historian.

While it is not new that the past has been used for present purposes, in the specific context of contemporary Chinese society, the past and present have an important connection: the past can be used to criticize the present when direct criticism targeting the current Party-state system and politics is not always possible. Bringing up the past

through activities of collective remembering is thus a tactic of activism, by which those invoking the past can thus resist various forms of media censorship and other forms of control, especially on the Internet.

This chapter addresses the paradoxical relationship that exists between the transient, instantaneous updating of social media and the need for preserving and archiving what has taken place. Through the analysis of the past events being used in journalistic practices on the platform of Weibo, I examine how social media change the ways in which public events are remembered and used in the present for activism.

3.1. Technological features of the past-present relation on Weibo

The technological features of social media have changed news production and circulation, and they also affect how the past is represented and connected to the present. Social media, in this case Weibo, have particular technological features that have made the formation of collective memory more individualized and fragmented, and its ensuing meanings have consequently become more flexible.

First, the age of social media has produced a shifting authority of news production and interpretation toward individualized and citizen based media practices. Mobile technologies and the centrality of individual users at Weibo make the production of news and collective memory an individualized process, highlighting individual stories both of the present event and of similar past narratives. As Mike, one media critic and popular writer, pointed out in his own experience of media and memory:

I remembered the heroes projected by the mass media during the flood of the Yangtze River in 1998, as we heard their stories everyday from television, but these were just simplified images of that disaster. However, with the Internet services, our memory of a news event changed. For example, for the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan, my memories were more detailed with many stories provided by individuals. In the age of Weibo the memory is even more individual-centered. Now we remember a more detailed account of the personal stories of the victims of the July 23 Railway Accident, such as the baby girl who lost her parents (Personal communication, July 23, 2012).

As the above quote illustrates, a shifting authority and focus on collective memory in social media now increasingly highlights the individual. While traditional media and the state typically used to stand at the center of the construction of an event, with its memory primarily based on traditional media coverage and interpretation and on what the state authorities were trying to conceal and expose to the public, in the age of social media a particular topical event is remembered with detailed individual stories. These detailed accounts were not as visible with the earlier dominance of state-controlled traditional media, and their visibility interrupts the institutional formation of collective memory that favors the official discourse.

The victims of a disaster, for instance, do not merely remain a number any more. Their stories are told and retold in the micro-blogsphere, with the expectation that they will be remembered as individuals with unique life experiences. For example, after the “July 23” railway accident in 2011, specific victims—a one-year-old girl who lost her parents, a

college student who died on her way home in the train, and the son of a dead locomotive engineer – were frequently mentioned in Weibo posts. Such an emphasis on individual-oriented memory making has also influenced the practices of some traditional media. For example, in July of 2012, the national television station (CCTV) imitated Weibo's online commemoration activity by announcing the names of people who had died in a Beijing thunderstorm disaster on its prime time news program. In the past, the victims were usually known to the public as a number in the news; their names were not made public and the online posting of the name list would be deleted very quickly.

Technologies such as portable devices and networked communication are highly celebrated among Weibo users, for they are convenient for individual authorship, as one can easily post witness or personal opinions. Through individual accounts, Weibo provides opportunities for individuals to participate and share with each other the experiences and opinions of public events, which become the building blocks of collective memory.

The network on Weibo also connects people who are geographically diverse and forms a “memory community” among them, one which is based on a shared past. According to Tony, the editor-in-chief of a popular history magazine,

The flooding after the ‘July 21’ Thunderstorm (in Beijing) was experienced by everyone in Beijing. Even if you were not in Beijing, you must have experienced it on Weibo. It was news on July 21, but now (July 24) it's already the past, or history. Now look at what was shared on Weibo, we see a lot of posts about ‘what I was doing during the thunderstorm’. Don't you think

this is a memory community? ... Through sharing our personal accounts, we can piece together a story that may be different from the official account, so we can use that to question the authority of the state. Every year on May 12, people post on Weibo about their memories of the earthquake in Sichuan. This is also a memory community. With the sharing activities on Weibo, we do not need things like a television speech of the Party-state leader to 'wake up' our memory, as we are now voluntarily waking up this memory by sharing publicly (Personal communication, July 24, 2012).

Tony's quote indicates that Weibo's networked connection and the ability to reach large number of users simultaneously facilitate memory sharing among individuals in public. Sharing is key to the making of collective memory on social media, and it is this activity by which a memory community is formed. What is more important is that now that the shared narratives are increasingly based on individual experiences and perspectives, rather than official accounts, it is possible for the public to remember a past event in a way less favored by the officials and to challenge the official narrative.

Individual authorship opens up multiple ways of interpreting an event. When individual citizens and journalists are at the core of an event's construction, the state and traditional media are no longer the only authority under which the event is interpreted, and they can no longer determine how a topical event covered by the media is going to be remembered by the public. A former investigative journalist who reported on multiple disasters, George has experienced this change, as he comments,

Individuals bring in diverse opinions and their own recordings of what happened on site to piece things together. This is how a particular event is written into history... The July 23 High-speed Railway Accident, for example, was the first news event with a multi-dimensional detailed record, with numerous contributors of facts and opinions. In this way, nothing can be left unnoticed. No detail can escape (Personal communication, August 21, 2012).

Therefore, while traditional media and the state promote their top-down, institutional version of the past, the bottom-up, individual-based memory making on Weibo shows that the more people contribute, the more detailed information about the past can be shared. The multiplicity and diversity of sources and authorities make it hard for the state and state-controlled media to monopolize news and memory, as the state and the traditional media are constantly challenged by new sources and evidence introduced by individuals.

Second, the speeding up of information flow makes a topical event more transient and fluid. A news event only enjoys a very short life span within the attention of the public, and thus an ongoing topical event can be turned to a past one very quickly. The acceleration of information exchange prompted by social media has put great pressure on the work of traditional media, as the journalists who work for traditional media now actively participate in information sharing on Weibo, providing first-hand information through Weibo often before their stories go to press. Robert, an investigative journalist

who works as the vice editor-in-chief of a leading financial magazine, has experienced this change:

Now it is very rare for a hot topic or news event to last for even a week. In 2004, I did a story for a newspaper and it had been a hot topic for a month. It later became one of the most important topics that year. However, now it is impossible for print media to achieve this. We have one or two hot topics each day, and they are quickly replaced by other things in social media platforms. Now you see that the thunderstorm in Beijing (July 2012) has been a hot topic for three days, but it will certainly fade away in a few days when something more urgent or more interesting takes place (Personal communication, July 23, 2012).

Therefore, news becomes outdated quickly. Social media platforms allow instantaneous, real time updates, so that during a specific time period, there is a high density of on-going events being discussed in platforms such as Weibo. The speed of print media cannot compete with the ever-changing new topics under discussion in social media. According to Robert,

Our magazine is published bi-weekly, and the hot topic had already been outdated when the magazine coverage came out, because the event had been fully discussed in social media before print media could follow up. Nobody would be interested in it any more (Personal communication, July 23, 2012).

It goes without saying that as a platform for instantaneous updates and live report, Weibo values speed. But the networked connection on Weibo enhances the possibility of

circulating the information widely in no time, which helps explain why more and more journalists have begun using platforms such as Weibo as a primary medium to release news and up-to-date information. Traditional media, despite their emphasis of timeliness, cannot compete with the freshness of news and the wide influence of Weibo.

As the ongoing “now” becomes transient and can be turned into the past very quickly, the memories produced and shared on social media become fragmented, short-lived, and fluid. There are two oppositional positions, represented by Robert and Tony, about the fragmentation of collective memory in social media. Both address the degree to which the fragmented piece of memory can contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the past-present relation. Robert, vice editor-in-chief of a financial magazine, actively took part in reporting a high-level official scandal on Weibo in 2012. He points out that although the event itself received huge amounts of public discussion during the time it was discovered, Weibo largely displayed fragmented pieces of the whole event:

Things like this (a high-level official scandal), at the time when we first read about it on Weibo, we enjoyed it very much, but to put it in a longer time framework, we won't remember much about it. It's very fragmented and no one bothers to collect more information and make a longer and systematic piece before it fades away (Robert, personal communication, July 23, 2012).

According to Robert, the social media platform is far from sufficient in the construction of collective memory. For instance, most Weibo posts on a past topical event are not

searchable after a certain period of time due to current technical constraints.²¹ Instead, the pieces of an event on Weibo need to be collected and put together to form a comprehensive narrative. In contrast, Tony, another editor-in-chief of a magazine, argues that even the fragmented memories remaining in social media platforms can be an effective way to better understand history:

Weibo at least provides a channel for individual stories to be summarized, collected, and become sediment. Even without a comprehensive text, they become part of our memory... We do not need a full-length text, a book, or a movie to recount the past (Personal communication, July 24, 2012).

According to him, collective memory does not have to be a full-length account of the past that speaks to the present. What is more important in the age of social media for collective remembering, accordingly, is the actual impact that a certain piece has on the public, especially when these pieces are different from what people learn through official channels.

Last but not least, although the collective memory of a particular event is fragmented, the relatively open access of social media invites individual participation and thus the meaning is malleable and negotiable, subject to change with individual contributions. The vehicle of collective memory has changed over time, and now the technologies in the Internet era have invited an active and wider range of participation. According to George,

²¹ Sina only allows the retrieval of search results that are posted within 48 hours of after the post, so most of the past hot topics cannot be searched. Sina also filters certain keywords during critical moments as requested by the state, which issues prohibition of reporting certain events. Sina takes action accordingly to filter relevant keywords in the search engine.

The collective memory constructed today is very different from that of the ‘prehistoric’ age. The memory formed in the past (pre-Internet era) is stable and fixed, as we received it from the official channel. ...But now memory can be changed, because of the emergence of the Internet-based technologies. Now people are more doubtful of the facts presented by media. We can add our own accounts to the event and create a different version of the memory (Personal communication, August 21, 2012).

Therefore, the open access of Weibo provides an opportunity for collective memory to take different shapes, as everyone can contribute to the meaning of an event by participating, regardless of whether it is written in history or as an item of developing news.

This open access and participation generate a sense of being together, as the platform of Weibo connects people through their participation. A radio journalist, Kitty, talked about her experience of public remembering on Weibo:

On the day of May 12 (the anniversary of the earthquake in Sichuan, 2008), we went to mourn on Weibo. Mourning together on Weibo connects people who have the same feelings together. Also, I feel that Weibo makes it easier for us to express our feeling toward a particular incident. I remember when I saw (on TV) the Hong Kong tourists who were hijacked in the Philippines.²² The local police was not doing a good rescue job, and some of the tourists

²² On August 23, 2011, a bus full of tourists from Hong Kong was hijacked in downtown Manila, Philippines. Before the hijacker was shot dead by the police, eight hostages were killed by the hijacker.

died in the end, and I expressed my anger on Weibo together with a large group of people who were mourning the dead tourists at the same time. In this way I feel I am part of the commemorating public (Personal communication, July 22, 2012).

By providing a platform that can be easily accessed, Weibo thus makes it more convenient for individual users to participate in public commemoration and the construction of narratives of the past, which could remind the public of the event, mobilizing further investigation.

In sum, the technological features of social media favor individualized memory making, featuring the stories of individuals as the key component to remembering a specific public event. With individual contributions, the details inaccessible before are made visible to the public and can be preserved, and the memory of the event is multi-dimensional; thus the monopoly of the official version is challenged. Accelerating information updates make it impossible to form a coherent and comprehensive narrative; thus the collective memory remains fragmented. The fragmented pieces also enable remembering, as they provide “keywords” for remembering, and these fragmented pieces become the core of the collective memory of an event. Finally, through open access and participation, a more detailed representation of the past can be produced on Weibo, as well as a sense of community with shared memories.

3.2. Journalism and history: remote past

In the Chinese context, journalism and history are closely connected. This section analyzes two primary ways in which the remote past and the memory of historical events

are used on Weibo. First of all, Weibo is a platform for authoring alternative versions of history. With the leadership of the journalistic community, individual citizens use Weibo to present their versions of particular historical events. These versions challenge the official (state-sponsored) version of history. Second, historical events are frequently cited on Weibo in the reporting of current news. This follows the Chinese tradition of using history as a mirror to the present, so that current news can be put into a historical context, despite the state's attempt to cut off some of the past-present connections.

The natural connection between journalism and history is often mentioned in Weibo posts. Users from the journalistic community are actively engaged in the discussion of topics on historical events, drawing analogies between the past and present and calling for revision of the official narratives of certain past events. The editor-in-chief of a popular history magazine, Tony, is a former journalist and a very active Weibo user. He talks about why he decided to launch such a magazine, and how the engagement with history was connected to his journalistic identity:

“China has rich historical resources, but for thousands of years, especially during the modern era, history has never been communicated and interpreted fairly in a transparent way in society. There is a collective need in the public to search for the ‘historical truth.’ I was a journalist before, and I noticed that a lot of interpretations of news events were found in the past, including those of our current political and economic system, moral crisis, territorial disputes, issues of ethnic minority, and so on. We need to find answers in history”
(Personal communication, July 24, 2012).

The above quote directly illustrates the two-fold uses of historical events. In order to do so, better communication channels are needed. At the same time, journalists are very important agents in bringing history to the public.

History writing from journalist to citizen on Weibo

Weibo is a platform to integrate the voices of intellectuals, journalists, and ordinary citizens in the representation of historical events. Journalists play a significant part in it, as they are not only involved but also mobilize the rewriting of history. As above-mentioned, Tony is an example of a journalist engaging in history writing and media production and an active user on Weibo, and the magazine that he oversees invites journalistic accounts and intellectual debates of particular historical events or phenomena, with an attempt to present narratives that are different from the taken-for-granted, officially authorized version of the past. Beyond the magazine, Weibo offers a channel for him to have direct interactions with readers, journalists, and scholars, who might provide ideas for new issues and articles.

The journalistic engagement with history writing is highly praised on Weibo. Another example is the work of a former journalist from Xinhua News Agency, Yang Jisheng, who is frequently mentioned on Weibo, as he wrote a book titled *The Gravestone* that depicted the Great Chinese Famine (1960-1962), published in Hong Kong²³. As one post noted:

²³ The topic of the Great Chinese Famine is still a very sensitive topic to be discussed publicly in China. This book was published in Hong Kong and was introduced to Chinese readers through trans-border traveling and online platforms.

@FT Laoyu²⁴: “I highly recommend those who have a blind faith in the (official version of) history of the Chinese revolution to read the book *The Gravestone* by Yang Jisheng, and then you’ll understand everything. He attributes the reason for 36 million people starving to death to Mao’s dictatorship...The author will be remembered forever for this book.”

Columnist @YeKF retweeted the post, which read,

People like Yang Jisheng represented the conscience of the Chinese people. Among the writings of historical record of the Great Chinese Famine, this is probably the best to read. With abundant evidence and detailed historical materials, he showed us that the evil of Mao’s regime is undeniable (October 15, 2011).

This discussion of the Great Chinese Famine highlights the importance of the voices of the journalistic community in creating a historical narrative that can compete with and challenge the monopoly of the official discourse. While in history textbooks the Great Chinese Famine was called a “three-year natural disaster,” with only a few brief sentences describing the situation, works like Yang’s book provide detailed evidence to show that it was not natural disaster but the fault of Mao. In the discussions on Weibo, the book is viewed as a groundbreaking example of journalists’ rewriting of history. The endorsement of more journalists further confirmed the book’s contribution and spread a different version of history to a wider public.

²⁴ A journalist in Financial Times Chinese website

Weibo provides a space not only for journalists but also for ordinary citizens who have access to alternative versions of history and can talk about it. Citing archived documents and accounts of the remote past is another very common practice on Weibo that contributes to the rewriting of history, and Weibo makes these materials more accessible to the general public. Writing history is no longer a task only for historians or elite journalists but can be shared by ordinary new media users. Tony calls this “citizen history writing,” and he basis it on the core idea that every individual user contributes to making history. During my interview, there was a nationwide activity called “high-school students writing history,”²⁵ organized by Tony and his magazine as an example of “citizen history writing.” It goes without saying that Weibo is a natural primary platform for mobilizing participation. As Tony explains,

For our understanding, history is like a puzzle work, which is based on every individual’s memory of a particular historical event. History is also a process of preservation and the accumulation of different generations. In ‘high school students writing history,’ people in the younger generation are going to interview their parents, grandparents, and relatives of older generations, through which they will get a personalized account of what happened before and write a story in their own perspective. In this way, memories of different generations are shared and preserved, and a memory community is formed.

Weibo is a primary channel for mobilizing students and their parents, and we

²⁵ This is an activity organized by the magazine, which involves workshops targeting high school students, bringing historians and other experts to teach high school students skills such as oral history, and encourage them to write local, personal-based history. Students can then submit their work to the magazine. There are currently plans to publish the first collection of students’ history writings as part of the advocacy of “citizen history writing.”

are also posting excerpts from their writings to let more people know and get feedback from our followers on Weibo (Personal communication, July 24, 2012).

According to Tony, memories are building blocks of history. Therefore, it is important to include the voices of ordinary people and their close family members all around the country and make them visible to a wider audience. By mobilizing diverse contributors across generations, a more comprehensive understanding of history can be achieved.

Weibo is thus a platform that mobilizes the practices of writing history, creating narratives that are different from official versions. These new narratives can thus contest the official ones, pushing the Party-state to reconsider its history and the mistakes it made in the past. Major historical events are being contested and rewritten on Weibo, with one primary example a heated debate about the Great Chinese Famine. In May 2012, the chief editor of *People's Daily's* Gansu branch, Lin Zhibo, posted on Weibo claiming that there was not enough evidence to prove the existence of the “great famine.” Because of Lin’s identity as the chief editor of the Party central organ’s newspaper (in a provincial branch), he was seen as representing official voices, and his post triggered a huge wave of comments and reposts, most of which were individual stories about family members, personal experiences, and witness accounts showing that Lin was wrong. After several days’ debate, Lin apologized publicly on Weibo. This debate was a very important moment because it brought to the forefront a historical event that had not been fully accessed by the public and was for decades known to the public as only a “natural disaster.” The collective reaction to Lin’s post reinforces the idea that it was Mao’s

“Great Leap Forward” campaign²⁶ that directly caused the disaster, and the debate on Weibo enhanced public awareness of this particular past event and further challenged its official narrative.

Another primary focus of citizen history writing is the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Not only are the calls for an official apology from the Party leader frequently seen on Weibo, but there are also substantial numbers of posts with detailed personal experience or historical anecdotes about the Cultural Revolution. A former Chinese photojournalist and the author of *Red-Color News Soldier*, Li Zhensheng (@Lizhensheng) frequently posts photos he took during the Cultural Revolution when he was a photojournalist for a provincial newspaper. Using the photos as evidence to retell his stories as a witness to the Cultural Revolution, he made great efforts to preserve over 100,000 photos he took at that time and he brought to the U.S where he lives now. A documentary made by the Japanese national public service television NHK about him was also widely circulated on Weibo. He was quoted in an interview with @SinaMedia (Sina’s media channel) saying, “My achievement was to leave tens of thousands of pieces of history. A great nation should be brave to face its own history” (May 7, 2012, cited in @SinaMedia Weibo post).

Weibo thus provides a platform on which the official version of history is challenged, providing more space to revising the official version. It brings journalists and individual citizens together, rewriting or reworking pasts that contest the official version and forming a community of memory around a certain historical event. The ensuing public

²⁶ The “Great Leap Forward” is a campaign initiated by Mao in the mid-1950s, both economic and social, which aimed at transforming China from a rural society to an industrial one (“Surpassing the UK and the USA” was a common slogan during that era). However, it led to a huge economic recession in the subsequent years, and the Great Chinese Famine was the outcome.

recognition – in this case that the state manipulated and distorted the past – generates questioning of the institutionalized history and the legitimacy of the regime.

The present use of the remote past

While the remote past is being continually debated and revised by individual contributions and journalistic accounts, it can also be used in news reporting itself. Although it is not uncommon to cite historical events in present news, what makes it specific in the contemporary Chinese context is that the past is used to critique the present political system and contemporary issues, and that this is accomplished at a point in time when direct criticism is not allowed in any other fashion.

The purpose of citizen history writing is not only to present facts from the past but also to produce meanings of the past that can be used for the present, as explained by Tony:

It is a tradition in Chinese culture to use anecdotes of the past as analogy for the present. Especially in the contemporary situation, when direct criticism of the current Party and state leadership and political system is strictly forbidden, individuals choose to use the past to express their opinions. This is particularly prominent on Weibo. You see people post anecdotes or debate about historical events on Weibo, but they are actually talking about present problems (Personal communication, July 24, 2012).

Therefore, “citizen history writing” is a reaction to the strict control of the channels of communication. From my interviews and experience on Weibo, I find that journalists tend to embrace a long-standing intellectual tradition of the Chinese culture of making

historical analogies to criticize the present, as history has been an important part in Chinese society since ancient times, and intellectuals used history to draw analogies and throw implicit criticism to the court and its politics. Journalists and on-site reporters can quickly link what is happening “now” to a similar “then,” arguing that there are lessons to be learned from the past. The remote past provides criticism and questions the legitimacy of the current regime, as acknowledged by Tony,

For example, the Great Chinese Famine is closely related to the present, because it involves a question of the legitimacy of the current regime. The question of legitimacy is about what the regime has done to its people and whether it can correct its mistake and prevent it from happening again. This is a central concern of the public (Personal communication, July 24, 2012).

As the quote shows, the past is a useful critique for the present because if the government cannot face its own mistake and refuses to admit it did wrong in the past, mistakes can recur. Therefore, discussion of the past can potentially pressure the current state. The invocation of past events in news reporting is a very common practice among journalists across cultural contexts, and Chinese journalism is no exception. Instances of the remote past, which refers to institutionalized historical events, often appear in news reports and on-site accounts implicitly or explicitly, depending on whether the past event is listed as a sensitive topic by the state. In general, there are two ways in which the remote past is used in current news reports. First, analogies can be drawn from the past to offer criticism and notes of warning about the present situation. Second, the problems revealed in the news today are attributed to unresolved historical issues of the past.

The most frequently mentioned event is the Cultural Revolution, not only because it lasted for ten years and had traumatic effects among the generations that grew up in Mao's era, but also because its meaning is still under contestation and debate. Even though the official authority has provided a final version²⁷ of its meaning, there is still no official apology or thorough investigation. Admittedly, there are significant numbers of users expressing their nostalgic feelings of the Cultural Revolution period and the Mao's era in general, but many recent incidents and political trends make people express fear over a possible recurrence of the Cultural Revolution. For example, "singing red songs" was a recent nationwide campaign initiated by high officials in the Party that involved mass participation. But its association with the Cultural Revolution proved problematic: by singing songs popular during Mao's era, with revolutionary themes and worshipping Mao, this campaign aimed at reviving the collective sentiments and "orthodox" ideas of Mao. In late 2011, at the campaign's climax, multiple Weibo users, many of them from the journalistic community, expressed their worry that this nationwide campaign could lead to another Cultural Revolution. Here is a post that expresses a common sentiment within the intellectual community:

The red songs have widely spread across the country, and the revolutionary model operas²⁸ have been performed on the national central television. I have warned people to watch out for the revival of Cultural

²⁷ *Resolution on Several Historical Questions for the Party since the Founding of PRC* is a file issued on June 27, 1981, in the sixth plenary session of the 11th CCP Central Committee. In this file, the Cultural Revolution was evaluated as "initiated by Mao as a mistake, utilized by a small counter-revolutionary clique...". This is the official qualification of the Cultural Revolution.

²⁸ Revolutionary model operas refer to the stage performances during the Cultural Revolution with revolutionary themes and formulaic stories and characters. A few works were selected to be circulated nationwide as the only performances available in the public during that time.

Revolution, but people laughed at me. However, over all these years, with the fever of money, the degrading morality, and the waves of campaigns like singing red songs, have the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution really left us? (@Zhaoch, October 24, 2011).

While underscoring the resemblance to the Cultural Revolution, this user notes that the current social condition is far more dangerous than people usually think, which can possibly produce another Cultural Revolution. By pointing out that the sentiment of that movement is still deeply rooted in society, he argues for further political reform that can solve the problems listed in his posts.

Other aspects of similarity with the Cultural Revolution also raise people's concern. On October 24, 2011, for instance, the *People's Daily* published an editorial criticizing certain popular television shows as being overly entertainment-oriented. The image of the newspaper was posted on Weibo and got numerous reposts. Key among them were archived images of newspaper editorials from 1966. One post alongside the editorial read, "Don't forget the Cultural Revolution started with restricting entertainment" (October 28, 2011). It was retweeted by many journalists.

Another example involves territorial disputes between Japan and China over Senkaku or Diaoyu Islands, when patriotic protests against Japan took place in multiple cities in China in August and September 2012. Many of the activities -- such as smashing Japanese cars, boycotting Japanese goods, and even beating Japanese citizens in China -- were labeled "irrational" on Weibo, as large numbers of Weibo posts by journalists and

other users called for a more rational attitude, alerting the public that the shadow of the Cultural Revolution was still there in society. For example, one TV host posted,

Suddenly I found the Cultural Revolution was so close to us. Suddenly I found in our society there is a huge group of mobs, and they are looking for every opportunity to take violent actions. How can you say you love your country if you don't love your compatriots? How can you protect the small island if you don't care about the private properties of your compatriots? (@Liuff, September 15, 2012)

This was reposted with a comment "The evil of Cultural Revolution has never left our hearts" (@Zhanglf, newspaper editor-in-chief). Another user posted a photograph taken in the streets of Beijing, and he added, "This is a photograph in the streets of today's Beijing. I just made it black-and-white with software, and you will notice that we're not far away from Cultural Revolution" (@Liwt, September 15, 2012). Moreover, on seeing the anti-Japanese protesters holding the portrait of Mao, @Wanglf (former journalist) commented, "Over thirty years have passed; now people still hold his portrait in their protest, and most of them are young people."

All of the above posts by people within the journalistic community suggest that the Cultural Revolution is not yet over. In their view, the overall irrational sentiment, the extremely violent activities, and the ignorance of individual property rights and the rule of law are all indicators of the possibility of its revival. Although official authorities do not leave much space for the Cultural Revolution's alternative public interpretations,

people on Weibo are still able to bring it up whenever there are incidents that invoke its past-present connection.

Other events, however, are more sensitive and cannot be directly mentioned on Weibo; otherwise the posts will be deleted immediately and the author's account suspended. One such example is the 1989 Tiananmen student movement, which is accorded a high level of sensitivity in Chinese public discourse. Traditional media are not allowed to mention it, and over the years Internet users have learned from past experience how to avoid being detected by using sensitive keywords when talking about it. It is telling, however, that during the event's various anniversaries, Weibo posts were still being deleted even though there was no direct mention of it. This is because a more sophisticated control system involving both machines and human labor was being used, one that can now detect implicit references to the incident. For example, a number of users uploaded pictures they had taken in Hong Kong where the annual candlelight vigil for the June 4th incident took place. These posts were immediately detected and deleted, even though there were no keywords. During those few days, even the image of a candle in Weibo's emoticon system, which is often used to express mourning and commemoration, disappeared, while many user accounts were temporarily or permanently suspended.

However, despite the pending risk of posting June 4th-related themes, they can still be found on Weibo, and they surface largely through the past-present connection. On August 14, 2011, citizens in the city of Dalian, northeast China, went to the streets to protest a chemical factory that was considered to be a threat to the environment. The participants posted about the protest on Weibo. During the protest, some Weibo users reported that

the police had started to use violence against the protesters. People who were not able to go to protest started to post, urging the protesters to go home. Such posts got numerous reposts, and one of them said, “Don’t repeat the tragedy that happened twenty years ago!” (@hexiaomi, retweeted).

The “tragedy of twenty years ago” is an implicit reference to the 1989 crackdown on the Tiananmen student movement. Understanding the meaning of this phrase and its connection to the present situation requires a shared cultural and historical background. Thus, although public discussion of the past itself is not allowed, an implicit reference with certain keywords was sufficient to make the past-present connection explicit. As in the above case of Dalian, because the latter event did not occur around the anniversary of June 4th, control over the reference was not as strict as it might have been otherwise.

Another way of using the remote past is to attribute today’s problems to unresolved issues of the past, making direct links between the two. In this regard, Weibo users post comments targeting the current social and political issues in general, such as corruption, by attributing it to past problems that were not settled. One example is a post written by columnist (@Yekf) criticizing the forced housing dismantles²⁹ of 2011:

Today’s corrupted officials and the officials violating private property (e.g. dismantling houses) are perpetrators from the Cultural Revolution. So, the

²⁹ The forced housing dismantle is a rising phenomenon in contemporary China, which often takes place in the urban areas. It involves local officials, real estate developers, and the original residents of a property. Because the land in China is owned by the government, individuals only have the right to use the land for 70 years. Although during the 70 years term individuals have private property rights, due to state ownership the state can still decide the use of the land, like real estate development. In this way, individuals cannot protect their property rights.

fundamental issue that we are facing today is that we didn't thoroughly expose and criticize what was wrong in the past (November 6, 2011).

After seeing so many incidents in which private individuals' homes were torn down for the sake of "development," Weibo users like Ye criticized the violation of individual property rights and the liaison between the local government and real estate developers, as the latter were known to often bribe local officials to use the land (state-owned) and dismantle the houses of current residents. Criticism like the post above directly associates today's violence conducted by officials with the violence of the Cultural Revolution. This connection, although without direct evidence, is considered to be quite plausible, because the officials today are generally at the age of the Cultural Revolution generation and so they experienced the Red Guard movement,³⁰ or could have committed violent activities against their teachers and parents, a common "revolutionary" practice of the time. In this way, today's problems are attributed to a larger historical context or framework, making them not only a product of today but also the result of unresolved historical issues. This makes the public further realize the necessity of a thorough investigation of and reflection on the past.

The remote past thus reveals a historical continuity that makes today's incidents understandable within a broader framework. Putting the present in a historical context has also changed the ways in which the public can understand current issues. Weibo facilitates individuals to accommodate historical connections that could challenge the

³⁰ The Red Guard movement is a mass movement initiated by Mao from 1966 to 1967, in the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. It mostly involved young people from high schools and colleges as the followers of "revolutionary" ideas.

taken-for-granted notions promoted by officials. During the above-mentioned territorial dispute between China and Japan, my informant George, a former journalist, showed me an archived image someone had posted on Weibo. It was the image of an editorial page of the *People's Daily* from 1953:

What did this editorial say? It shows such an important fact that at that time (1953, after the establishment of PRC), Chinese people, at least the officials, did not recognize the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands as China's territory... Yet today people are very angrily expressing their hatred toward Japan on this issue. The history behind this dispute, however, is much more complicated (Personal communication, August 21, 2012).

The post provides strong evidence to challenge the notion that the island has belonged to China since its existence, in response to the "patriotic" mass protests taking place in multiple cities, informing the public that history is not that simple and that what they are fighting for today is based on an ambiguous or even wrong assumption. Although it did not stop the extremely violent activities against everything targeted as "Japanese," a post like this certainly provides a historical connection that could not be accessed without individual efforts on Weibo. Moreover, it potentially leads to a new understanding of the current issue.

Although invocation of the past is a common practice among journalists, what is unique in the case of Weibo is that the memory of a historical event is not only used for making sense of the present but also to question, criticize, and challenge the authority and ownership of the official version of the past and the legitimacy of the current regime.

Weibo's relevance in this regard can be understood as the result of strict media control, which makes it extremely difficult to criticize the current government and officials directly. Therefore, to use the remote past tends to be an effective method.

3.3. Instantaneous past: online commemoration, memory accumulation, and the first draft of history

The fast speed of information updating in social media platforms, as pointed out in the previous sections, has changed the ways in which topical events are shared and remembered. This section focuses on the other type of past that is used in forming collective memory in contemporary China on Weibo – the instantaneous past. While it seems contradictory to put the two words together, this analysis shows that, just as the remote past can be used in journalistic practices to produce new meanings in news coverage, news events that are just taking place can also be used as past resources. The past-present connection built upon instantaneous information updates has blurred the boundary between the two, and collective memory in social media takes different shapes in accordance.

On Weibo, online commemoration becomes a daily routine, serving as a constant reminder to the public not to forget certain incidents. When past events have similarity to current ones, journalists and other citizens draw on the past in their engagement with an on-going event to add to its newsworthiness. Further, the journalistic community has a strong sense of writing news as the first draft of history, trying to preserve evidence for the future. All of these activities take place in the face of the state's strengthening control

over traditional media, and they illustrate different ways of using collective memory to contest the present.

Online commemoration

Journalists take the leading role in commemorative activities on Weibo, as anniversaries and commemoration of specific events, whether officially marked or not, are very sensitive to dates and times. Journalists thus often initiate the commemoration of accidents and disasters. The networked connectivity and fast speed of information sharing that characterize Weibo make online commemoration a convenient practice. While journalists are still uploading the latest videos and the developing story of a disaster or accident, the posts containing victims' names, pictures, or user-generated commemorative videos have already received tens of thousands of reposts. This real-time memory making happens in multiple cases, in which news and memory are made simultaneously on social media platforms. The frequency of online commemoration reminds the public that the past has not passed, with issues unresolved and facts unreleased to the public by the officials.

Because of the acceleration of information updating and the density of events visible on Weibo during a certain period of time, it is not an easy task to draw the public's attention to a certain event, as it fades away quickly. However, the proliferation of the anniversary commemorations on Weibo shows that it is inaccurate to characterize the age of digital and social media as "forgetful."

Various commemorative activities on Weibo help people to remember events otherwise easily forgotten, especially when the only other version comes from the state-controlled

mainstream media. Online commemorative activities include immediate commemoration that happens right after the breaking news of a disaster or accident as well as voluntary commemorations on anniversaries and specific occasions.

In general, the events being commemorated are often disasters and accidents in which people died and very limited media coverage was allowed. Thus, online commemoration has provided a way for the public to process grief. It mobilizes the public not only to mourn the loss of life but also to question the officials in charge. Online commemorations serve as a reminder to the general public that there are severe problems in the current political system that exacerbate the outcome of the disaster/accident, and that the public needs to constantly remind the government to take responsibility.

First, online commemoration can take place immediately after the incident has been reported via media channels, which mainly involves virtual mourning. The most common practice requires only a simple mourning post with the emoticon of a candle and short expressions such as “R.I.P” to the people who died in the accident. This kind of Weibo post is easy to create, and it can receive huge numbers of retweets with candle emoticons. Another kind of mourning post starts with expressions like “please remember the victims,” followed by the name list. The relay of victims’ names on Weibo happens in multiple disasters and accidents, such as the high-speed railway accident in July 2011, the school shuttle accidents in rural China (November and December, 2011), and the thunderstorm and flooding in Beijing in July 2012. Highlighting the victims, particularly through details such as their names and stories, creates a collective memory of an event that is centered on individual lives, showing respect for individuals. This is quite different

from the official version, in which victims are just numbers or are even concealed to the public.

Second, journalists and media institutions make anniversaries of news events visible via Weibo, which invites a wider range of users to participate in online commemoration. The railway accident on July 23, 2011 was a primary example that received nationwide and even worldwide attention and criticism through the channel of Weibo. A year later, on its anniversary, there was still no official report on the investigation of the real cause of the accident. Various posts about the accident emerged, despite the prohibition issued by the state, to urge the public to continue questioning the government for the truth and to remember those who lost their lives in the accident.

Different types of commemoration surfaced. The first type involved a revisiting of the original stories. On July 23, 2012, @NanduShendu³¹ posted the links to five articles published by the Southern Metropolitan Daily a year earlier, all of which provided investigative reports about different aspects of the accident. The posting of these articles brings the readers back to the original story. The second type was the relay of icons symbolizing public mourning. For example, @Pingan Wenzhou³² used the hash tag topic (#July 23 High-speed railway accident anniversary#) and posted “R.I.P. all the victims!” with an image of lighting candles, which was retweeted by multiple media institutions and individual journalists. A third type involved a call to remember individual victims, including their names and their stories. A journalist @AnF posted an image of the name list of the victims in the accident, saying, “let’s remember them”; it was retweeted by

³¹ Official Weibo account of the investigative report team of *Southern Metropolitan Daily*.

³² Wenzhou police office account.

@JP1982, a journalist and my informant, with the message, “thanks, my dear friend, for remembering them.” @Headline News and @Economic Observer retweeted a story of the life of a baby girl, who lost her parents in the accident and was severely injured. Both quoted a local newspaper report about her, one year after the accident. These posts illustrate that online commemoration involves collaboration among journalists, media institutions, and other social groups/institutions. They bring the readers back to the days of the accident, initiate public mourning, and show the present condition of past victims. All of this suggests that the collaboration involved in creating shared memories of major incidents like the high-speed railway accident enhance solidarity across different social groups.

Online commemoration on Weibo often attracts censorship and state intervention, online and offline. During the anniversary of the July 23 high-speed railway accident, the posts on Weibo commemorating the accident quickly disappeared. Similarly, many newspapers planned to do special reports, but these pages were cancelled overnight. A famous blogger and media commentator @Lichengpeng wrote about how their commemoration activities were stopped and people at the site of the accident were expelled by the local police (July 23, 2012). Although all traditional media were silenced on the anniversary by the prohibition, journalists and media institutions continued posting or even went to join on-site commemoration activities.

Despite the strengthened control and the state’s intervention of the formation of collective memory, different kinds of online commemoration show the public’s resistance to forgetting. Although during special time periods and for some topics that are considered

sensitive these commemorative posts are deleted very quickly, the continual posting and reposting still render them visible to a wide range of users. In addition, the decentralized structure of Weibo makes it difficult for the administrator to completely shut down the topic.

The intensive online commemoration and the state's attempt to stop these activities also imply a huge split in public opinion—one side represented by social media and individual journalists, and the other represented by officials and pro-government media, such as Xinhua News Agency, CCTV, *People's Daily*, and *Global Times*. As the mouthpiece of the Party and the state, the latter, together with the Party and the state, are making efforts to suffocate the tragic aspects of those accidents, emphasizing the “good things” the government did or keeping silent during anniversaries. However, Weibo provides a space that allows for constant contestation of these attempts. Online commemoration is not only for remembering, but also for further questioning, holding the government accountable for this particular incident. It is a collective resistance to the attempt of forced forgetting that leaves the broader issues unresolved. Journalists thus play a leading role in initiating commemorative activities, collaborating with other social groups.

Memory accumulation

Past events that are related to an ongoing news event add to the newsworthiness of the current story. Some past events are seen as sensitive topics by the government; some are not but may be labeled sensitive in the future. By recalling past events, whether or not they are sensitive, Weibo can put pressure for further investigating the present. Various past events are invoked when a major accident or disaster happens, because of the shared

elements in those stories. Journalists and media institutions are familiar with each of the events, which can be easily recalled on Weibo.

Past events being cited add to the news value of the present, making possible more powerful criticism of the Party-state system. The July 23 high-speed railway accident is a starting point for the accumulation of memories of accidents that share similarity. A devastating accident with numerous people dead, including children, the story reveals that the officials (Minister of Railways) did not respect individual lives but were trying to conceal the truth, triggering questions about the overall quality of the high-speed railway system. Therefore, when present accidents have one of these similar features, “July 23” is cited as a past reference. Citing the high-speed railway accident (“July 23”) gives multiple on-going accidents of a similar nature wider public attention. Moreover, since the investigation of the “July 23” accident was never fully publicized, whenever similar but smaller scale accidents take place, they invite further questioning of the past itself.

For example, in September 2011, two months after the fatal accident of the high-speed railway train in China, a subway accident happened in Shanghai, as two subway trains crashed due to the malfunction of the signaling system. This incident was very similar to the high-speed railway accident, in that the signaling system in the subway was reported to be the same as the one used in the high-speed railway.

Retweeting a post about the problematic signal system by @XinhuaNet Zhejiang Channel³³, @XinminzhoukanYJ asked, “From this we can see how serious the consequences can be without a thorough investigation of the responsibility of July 23.

³³ The official Weibo account of the Zhejiang branch of Xinhua.net.

After Wenzhou, it is Shanghai, and what about after Shanghai?” (September 27, 2011).

With the recall of “July 23,” the story of the Shanghai subway accident became a nationwide piece of news because of its connection with the devastating train accident known worldwide, even though it was smaller in scale. Similarly, in late November 2011, in the rural area of Gansu Province in northwest China, a school shuttle accident took place, in which 21 children died in an overloaded vehicle. This accident was immediately linked to the past ones, including “July 23,” which also had victims who were children.

Only a few weeks later, in December, another school shuttle accident happened in a rural area of Jiangsu Province in east China. Journalists immediately connected it with the above-mentioned one in Gansu that was still a hot topic on Weibo and provided a list of past events with young victims. While the first accident itself was still developing news, it also became a past that could be recalled when something similar just took place. In this case, the temporal distance between the past and present events was shortened, the second one made more visible after a nationwide discussion of school shuttle safety following the first accident in November. As one journalist and activist, @Wangkeqin, posted after the accident in December:

#Serious school shuttle accident in Jiangsu# While the crying and weeping of the families of the children killed in Gansu's school shuttle accident are still lingering, we hear the news about a huge loss of lives in a school shuttle accident in Jiangsu. This is not only a great blow to their families, but also a huge irony to the lately announced draft of Creed of School Transportation Safety. The frequent school shuttle accidents show that the government did

not treat the children of ordinary citizens as human beings (@WangKeqin, December 10, 2011).

In this way, past events accumulate in public discussion and reinforce the newsworthiness of both accidents, enhancing the importance of the relevant issue, in this case the safety of children in China. Together with the two accidents, Weibo users also cited other accidents that had involved young children, such as children who died because of poor school building quality during the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan, an incident involving poisoned milk powder and baby formula that had made thousands of babies sick, as well as a 1996 theatre fire in Xinjiang, in which over 200 children died as they were ordered to remain seated and make way for officials to escape first. All of these past incidents were cited to criticize official neglect of individual lives, especially children. The present is thus situated in continuity with a chain of past events with a similar unresolved nature. This association makes the criticism of the present more powerful.

Environmental protest is another topic that was made significant due to a series of online protests and the frequent recall of past ones. In August 2011, the citizens of Dalian went to protest against a P-Xylene chemical factory located in its suburbs. This event itself received a wide range of attention on Weibo, with all kinds of on-site reports about the protest. Meanwhile, journalists and media institutions not only participated in live broadcasting and commenting about the protest on Weibo, but they also referenced the story of Xiamen (a coastal city in Southeast China) from 2007, in which people had gone to the streets to protest and finally stopped the building of a P-Xylene (PX) factory. Stories of Xiamen were cited, reposted, and their successful experiences were used to

reflect upon the contemporary situation in Dalian. For example, @Jizhedejia (reporter home) and @CaixinNet³⁴ tweeted the reprint of newspaper and magazine articles about Xiamen and posted them on Weibo. @Jizhedejia retweeted an excerpt from *Southern Weekend* from 2007:

Some of them are local Xiamen citizens. Some just found jobs in Xiamen. They didn't know each other, but they came together for themselves and for the city.

The governmental officials in Xiamen, from strong opposition to negotiation, they grew up with the citizens over the half-year period. The efforts made by the citizens of Xiamen will shed light on China's future (August 15, 2011).

The protest in Xiamen was highly valued as an event with far-reaching significance. It was also the beginning of the public recognition of the importance of this environmental issue, especially the danger of the chemical product P-Xylene, which had never been widely known to the public before. By calling on the past of Xiamen, the protest in Dalian thus received much more public attention than it might have otherwise.

The environmental issue became even more visible in public discussion when similar protests were widely reported on Weibo in July 2012. These protests took place in Shifang, a small town in Sichuan Province, and Qidong, in Jiangsu Province. The protests in Xiamen and Dalian paved the way for constructing the narratives of the latter two on Weibo. Although the two cities are not as big as the major port cities of Xiamen and Dalian and were barely known to most of the non-local people before the protests, they were protesting against environmental pollution, and that fact, combined with the online

³⁴ Official Weibo account of the website of Caixin media group.

broadcast on Weibo, facilitated connections being made to the two more prominent environmental protests of the past. The more current events thus became part of the bigger stories about local residents' right to life without environmental threat, the transparency of information flow between policy makers and citizens, and the negotiation over economic development (local GDP) and individual well-being.

All of this suggests that past events become more powerful when they are linked, accumulated, and put together for present use, which also reinforces the news value of the present story, making more powerful criticism of existing problems in the Party-state system. Developing news can be turned into a past resource with the emergence of similar new events, without a clear boundary between news and memory.

First draft of history in the digital age

Chinese journalists have a very strong sense of writing the first draft of history in their professional life. Not only must today's news be understood by looking for meanings in history, but journalists also have in mind a mission to write the first draft of history for the future generation. Chinese journalists have a very strong sense of history, which comes from a long tradition of Chinese intellectuals that have borne the responsibility of writing for future generations (Tony, Personal communication, July 24, 2012). Because within the social context of Chinese modernization modern Chinese journalism developed with a combination of Confucianism and Western liberal ideas (Volz, 2006), a self-identification with intellectuals gives journalists a sense of belonging to a community with a mission to influence society and rescue the nation with their writings (de Burgh,

2003; Pan and Lu, 2003). This is also why this study understands journalism in a broader sense that includes a wider range of participants such as writers and scholars.

As mentioned in the previous sections, there is a natural connection between journalism and history among journalists in the Chinese context. Journalists, collaborating with Weibo users who are engaged in reporting news events, are very conscious about turning the developing news event into history. This is often expressed in words such as “it should be recorded in history,” and “this should never be forgotten.” For example, when the local government of Dalian announced the cancellation of the PX factory, numerous posts initiated or retweeted by journalists and ordinary citizens celebrated the victory:

Today’s Dalian is so beautiful. This is the triumph of the citizens of Dalian, and it is also the triumph of the citizens who connect with those in Dalian through Weibo...The will of the citizens has now had an unprecedented way of expression, and my experience makes me feel the great significance of the victory of Dalian. *I strongly believe that it will be written into history.*

(@Qianwz, August 14, 2011, italics by the author)

This post had been retweeted over 7,000 times by the time I collected it (on the night of August 14, 2011). The expression of “written into history” shows that the participants, on-site and off-site, think highly of the significance of the event as it can cast its influence upon the future. They are eager to see this event being recorded and preserved.

The fast speed of information updating in social media posits the question of how to preserve information that is necessary for writing history. In the social media environment, firsthand reporting of the news story is simultaneously taking place with a

story's archiving. While being reported, the event itself is also archived, as evidence to be remembered in the future. There are two ways that journalists are primarily engaged in writing their stories into history, as they are racing with the fast speed of information updating and increasingly sophisticated censorship. The first is to directly contest censorship by lamenting the state intervention of journalism and media products and to spread contents that will potentially be censored before that can possibly happen. The second is to collect all kinds of materials that have already been published and integrate them to form an archive and keep record of a major public event.

Due to the strict media censorship, which involves cancelling newspaper pages and TV programs, deleting online posts, and other forms of forced forgetting, it is quite necessary to preserve the firsthand account for the first draft of history. It is the sense of responsibility for the future that motivates journalists to make efforts to preserve the evidence of a story that is unfolding. They have a strong fear of not being able to face the future generation if they are not able to preserve the evidence of today. If they have to surrender to censorship, they might experience shame for having failed future generations. Therefore, they tend to show strong reactions to censorship. Journalists often post on Weibo to lament when state officials issue prohibitions of topics or cancel newspaper pages, which prevent them from keeping their original record for the future.

For example, on the seventh day after the high-speed railway accident, which is an important day in the Chinese funeral tradition, a photojournalist posted, "Seven days' sorrow does not lead to hope on the eighth day. From burying the truth on site to suffocating the truth in the press, they (the state officials) reveal their true face"

(@Photographer CJ, July 30, 2011). In another post, he stated, “There is hardly any information on the portals now. A huge team of ‘social stability maintenance’ is controlling all the streets, public squares, and even communication channels. No matter how much sorrow you have, no matter how many restless souls (of the victims) are waiting for justice and comfort, the cold machine is ceaselessly devouring all emotions and justice in the world” (@Photographer CJ, July 30, 2011). In these two posts, the journalist lamented the ruthless machine of censorship that tries to erase the traces of the past, violating the public’s rights to mourn and to remember and journalists’ rights to protect the traces of the past.

Being aware that a news report can be censored at any point, journalists tend to write on Weibo about their engagement in a story. In doing so, even though the reader may eventually not be able to see the story appear in the media, they would recognize the efforts made by journalists in preserving historical evidence. For instance, after the deadly thunderstorm in Beijing, July 21, 2012, which cost 77 lives, a weekly news magazine planned to publish a special issue. On July 24, before the issue was out, an editor of that magazine posted,

Wang (the name of a journalist) did a story of a 24-hour, real-time record of the thunderstorm. He and three other journalists plus five interns are still writing the story now. They interviewed many people in all aspects. It is a very deep investigation. Now we have got 60 pages of this special issue, and I’m very confident about its quality. We’ll not disappoint our readers. *If we*

cannot produce heavy and thick commemoration with our whole heart, we will be ashamed to face 'July 21' (Italics by the author).

The above post indicates that the journalistic community has a very strong sense of responsibility of passing on a record to future generations. Weibo gives them such a space to make their involvement in history visible. Similar expressions can often be found on Weibo when there are major events that involve moments of crisis but the media control is very tight. The urge to leave the evidence of the past for the future is thus a strong reaction and resistance to censorship that is trying to cut off public access to potentially censored information.

Weibo fulfills the impulse of trying to preserve the present that can be remembered in the future, and it opens up a space that traditional media do not have. Robert, a former journalist and now vice editor-in-chief of China's leading financial magazine, thinks highly of journalists' role as a recorder of history, but he also notices that traditional media could no longer play a key role in this, as there are increasingly strict controls by the state. At the same time, the traditional media cannot catch up with the new media forms of both covering and archiving a story.

There are so many restrictions on us (traditional media). Now we cannot do anything. In the year 2012, at least there were two instances that I feel we journalists are ashamed in facing the history in the future: there weren't any coverage of two important moments—the Wang Lijun Incident and Chen

Guangcheng's exile.³⁵ Only Weibo did it (Personal communication, July 23, 2012).

Robert thinks that these two incidents are important in particular because China was about to have a leadership transition, but the state-controlled traditional media were muted, blanking out the pages of history where these events should have been recorded. However, with the channel of Weibo, these events can be partly recorded. In this way, when journalists take hold of Weibo, all they have to do is to make the best out of it and leave traces of history. When the traditional media are unable to provide the first draft of history, it is the journalists' turn to Weibo that leaves the record.

The circulation of contents vulnerable to censorship is widely conducted among journalists, in order for wider range of Weibo users to remember them. Through the networks of journalists on Weibo, the responsibility for preserving memories is widely spread. Expressions like "this should be remembered," "please circulate before being deleted," "let's remember this," and "we have made history" are quite often seen. These expressions mobilize the participants to preserve history for the future. While the information updates on Weibo are very fast, these kinds of expressions remind people that there are things that cannot be forgotten and should be carried on to the future, and

³⁵ Wang Lijun was the vice mayor of the city of Chongqing. He played a crucial role in the downfall of the highly controversial Party leader Bo Xilai in Chongqing, who attempted to revive Mao's revolutionary style and political practices to secure his future position among the highest leaders in the central Party. Wang fled to the Consulate of the United States in Chengdu seeking political asylum, and then Bo's corruption and his wife's involvement in a murder case were revealed. However, although discussions of Wang's activities erupted on Weibo soon after he entered the Consulate, no media coverage was allowed. Chen Guangcheng was a blind activist in the rural area of Shandong Province, who was in prison from 2006 to 2008. When he was released from prison, he was put under house arrest. He successfully escaped with the help of other activists and went to the U.S. Embassy in Beijing. This event received global media coverage and heated discussion on Weibo, but no words about it were published in any channel of traditional media in China.

their posts contain all kinds of evidence of developing stories that might be deleted later, including on-site photos and videos, firsthand witness accounts, or links to related blogs, all racing against the official attempts to eradicate evidence.

Journalists also preserve history and make memory for the future generation by collecting materials that are available and making integrated archives. Posting newspaper pages is one of these practices. This is a way of archiving developing stories, and the activity is not totally new in that it has been conducted since before Weibo. On Weibo, these kinds of activities happen more frequently and continue to serve in turning developing news events into collective memories for future generations. After the high-speed railway train accident on July 23, 2011, *21 Century Economics* collected major newspapers in China on the seventh day after the accident, a Chinese traditional mourning day, and put them into one single picture to upload to Weibo, with the following words, “now, we’re witnessing history. Life cannot be neglected. History will remember everything” (@21 Century Economics, July 23, 2011). This post indicates a connection between the activities of collecting and archiving newspaper front pages and witnessing history, emphasizing the participation of journalism in such a process.

3.4 Conclusion

Various technological features of social media platforms have transformed news production and the formation of collective memory, particularly as they relate to online activism. The individualized, networked and mobile communication technologies and the 140-character limit of Weibo facilitate personalized information sharing. Though the fast speed of information exchange, especially the instantaneous updates, has fragmented the

past and present, social media platforms and technologies are today friendlier to individual usage, making collective memory more individualized. The fragments of a public event serve as the authoritative view of the past, leading collective remembrance. They are products of personal contributions that offer diverse perspectives and details that are not used to be available in traditional media channels, although they do not form a coherent and comprehensive narrative. Both information of the past and the present are becoming more visible and accessible, inviting individual participation and crossing the boundaries set by the state monopoly of information accessibility.

Overall, there is a celebratory tone among journalists and general Weibo users, praising the triumph of the new technology of social media over state intervention in making news and collective memory. They celebrate the fast speed of information updates, which helps to bypass the strict media censorship. They also praise new technologies for the networked connection of large populations, with the imagination of tens of millions of users simultaneously receiving the message of a particular event considered to be much more influential than institutionalized ways of communicating. In addition, the journalistic community also celebrates the individualization of media use and production of news and collective memory. The technologies that support the role of the individual in Weibo are considered central and the individualized news report and memory making seen as a powerful contestant to the state authorities and the institutionalized version of both past and present.

However, this overly optimistic view of the potential of new technologies being used in Weibo tends to overlook the problems that are tied to these technologies. For example,

because of the fast speed of information updating, it is hardly possible to capture the full picture of a developing event, as it disappears quickly from public attention. What remain are usually the name, location and date of such an event, which become the core of collective memory, without an in-depth understanding of its nature. Similarly, though the individualization of news and memory making challenges the official framework and authority, the lack of further verification of the pieces of information provided by individuals makes it highly possible that the information shared is not accurate. And as it spreads out quickly to a large group, it is hard to make any corrections.

Nonetheless, social media have changed the past-present relation, making the past and present more closely connected and their boundary blurred. The sources of the past become more accessible with open and flexible meanings, and the boundary between the past and present is not as clear as in earlier times: an ongoing event can quickly be turned into the past with the emergence of new events. This slippery boundary between past and present helps the accumulation of past events for the use of present purposes, by which collective memory is not just about the meaning of the past. Instead, it concerns how the past is represented in relation to the present. Both the remote and the instantaneous past contribute to the formation of collective memory, situated in the urge for preserving the transient through social media. Various mnemonic practices were used in major news events to mobilize participation and collective actions online to fight against the state's attempts to force the public forget important events and monopolize the rights to write the past.

The remote past plays an important role in journalistic practices on the platform of Weibo. There is a natural connection between journalism and history, and thus journalists are highly conscious of using the past to criticize the present. Not only can the ongoing news be easily linked back to historical events but with relatively open access Weibo invites its users to participate and contribute to history writing. Journalists are leading the citizen-based, grassroots history writing, challenging the authority of the officially written past.

The instantaneous past, on the other hand, serves the present in different ways. Online commemoration invites individual participation and in this process forms a kind of community with shared memories. It also opens up spaces for sharing and remembering topical events, when official commemoration is not allowed. The activity of online commemoration on Weibo marks new days that need to be remembered by the public, in memory of individuals and events that are not necessarily favored by the state authority. It pushes the limits of the official discourse and the baseline of censorship, so that individual lives will be respected and remembered, and in some cases compensated, and establishes a framework to make sense of the importance of particular news events, different from the interpretations offered by the state and traditional media.

Whenever a developing story emerges, stories with similar elements are cited, and can be used to make sense of the present one. This practice helps the contemporary stories enjoy more newsworthiness and visibility, by drawing on the availability of symbolic resources as a result of the condensed news events being discussed on Weibo. It also provides a broader picture that addresses common issues behind all of the stories, formulating a more powerful critique, which is usually related to the Party-state system in

the contemporary Chinese context. However, accumulated past events can produce biased collective memories. People tend to remember their shared elements and neglect the specificity of the developing story.

Mindful of the notion of news as the first draft of history, journalists and media institutions participating in Weibo are highly conscious of “writing history” for the future generation. This gives them a mission to preserve the kinds of information that are worth keeping for the future and provides a way to mobilize collective actions among journalists and beyond, resisting the attempt at forced forgetting through censorship.

In all of these ways, journalism plays an important role in the mnemonic practices in social media platforms as ways of contesting the official meanings of the past. Journalists are the leading voices in individual contributions to rewriting the past, creating different versions from official history. They are also highly conscious of the use of past events in the present, highlighting commemorative days and events, bringing up past events in the development of news stories, and actively preserving memories for the future. Journalism uses the past not only as a way to mobilize a wider range of users to contest the present Party-state system, but also for resisting the censorship and control that are regularly imposed on the journalistic community and Internet users in general, struggling for more journalistic freedom.

4. Global and local: reinventing a Chinese identity

This chapter situates journalism and collective memory in the global flow of information. Journalism in contemporary China is globally oriented, and collective memory is also a construction of both global and local sources. Weibo facilitates the global reach and accessibility of news events, contributing to new meanings of Chineseness through an engagement with the past. I argue that Weibo has become a contesting field where global sources can be used to resist censorship and contest the meaning of Chinese national identity and the vision of China's future route promoted by the Party-state. The new versions of Chinese identity created by liberal-leaning users have three major components – connection, comparison, and compassion.

First, by connection, I refer to the transnational Chinese platforms that facilitate the free flow of information by challenging the state installation of the Great Firewall. These transnational platforms include individuals in the Chinese diaspora, the global media's coverage of China-related topics, and Chinese-speaking individuals situated outside of China who have high levels of transnational mobility, such as foreign correspondents, students and international business people. The global connection of these platforms to Weibo facilitates the provision of materials that build up versions of public events that are different from the officially constructed ones, and they play an important part in shaping collective resistance to the Chinese state's attempt to block the free flow of information across its sovereign boundaries.

Second, “comparison” focuses on the formation of multiple “others” for China, which are accessed through the global-local news flow. By multiple others, I refer to the nations and societies that set examples of what a civilized nation means for China. These multiple others include the United States, Japan, Taiwan, and other states under democratic transition. An exception is North Korea, which is used as an example that China should not follow. Past events in other nations are frequently cited to compare with the present one in Chinese local settings, and news in other parts of the world is often compared with China’s past. These multiple others create for China an ideal version of a civilized nation, which is based on “universal values,” understood by liberal-leaning users as a value system that should be shared by all nations and societies. For the liberal-leaning users, “universal values” include a set of Western liberal-democratic-based ideas such as democracy, freedom of expression, human rights, and constitutionalism. Liberal-leaning Weibo users draw on events in the past and present that involve these nations and societies to compare with the situation in China. This strategy forms a powerful critique of China’s problems, challenging the Party-led ideal that affirms China’s unique route to modernity, which highlights the revival of the nation in the world under the leadership of Communist Party.

Finally, “compassion” in the new Chinese national identity refers to the establishment of a global membership, a collective sense of belonging that competes with the national-based identity. Global membership is established vis-a-vis self-reflection towards China’s past, and it involves moving beyond narrow-minded nationalism, as a result of the long-time indoctrination of patriotic education. Instead, as a Chinese, one must show empathy with other nations and people in times of crisis. Weibo provides a space for the

development of an understanding that being Chinese is also being global. This global membership, however, is itself the expression of a Chinese national identity in a more “civilized” form, whose purpose is not to form a sense of cosmopolitanism or identity without nationality, but to challenge the versions of nationalism imposed by the Party-state and popularized by the media, including the Internet.

4.1. Connection: transnational Chinese platforms

Weibo connects Chinese-speaking users across the globe through shared language and the experience of news events, with the help of various transnational Chinese platforms mainly outside of China proper. These platforms include ethnic Chinese people in the diaspora, social groups that are less bounded by particular geographical locations and have high levels of transnational mobility,³⁶ and domestic Chinese who have access to global sources. Individuals with high levels of transnational mobility tend to have closer connections to both sides, and thus it is easier for them to transport and share information across borders. Taken together, these transnational Chinese platforms use Weibo to facilitate the free flow of information, fighting against the state’s attempt to cut off the flow and providing materials that produce different versions of public events.

The incorporation of such transnational platforms in large part derives from developments in globalization. Global forces such as migration, technological convergence, and media deregulation and privatization have produced a transnational imagination through electronic media production and consumption, which has intensified the interaction between people inside and outside China (Sun, 2005). The Internet plays

³⁶ Foreign correspondents, business professionals, students and scholars, etc.

an important role in connecting Chinese people across national boundaries and forms a transnational cultural sphere. It serves not only to mobilize protests internationally and facilitate civil society development in China but also cultivates the meanings of being Chinese (Yang, 2003).

But such developments are not automatic. China's installation of the Great Firewall substantially blocks its ordinary citizens from accessing information that is not favored by the government,³⁷ such as information listed as threatening to social stability. This situation not only motivates domestic Chinese people to actively seek technological assistance to circumvent constraints but also invites transnational Chinese platforms to participate in the transportation of information. Although the connection between China and the outside world through globally popular social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube is limited, Weibo does not limit its user base to China, making global participation possible. Users living outside China can thus introduce news and opinions that are otherwise blocked by the Great Firewall (GFW), adding to the sophisticated tactics developed by people living inside China to "jump over the wall" (Fanqiang). Collaboration between the two sides makes the Wall permeable, reinforcing the global connection.

Scholars have pointed out that the centrality of China as the imagined homeland for the Chinese diaspora is problematic (e.g. Ang 2001). In my study, I argue that on Weibo, China is still the central concern for Chinese-speaking people on a global scale, but it is no longer an imagined homeland for Chinese all over the world as portrayed by the

official Chinese media. On Weibo, overseas migration is no longer considered a patriotic act contributing to the state's project of modernization or a source of legitimacy for the post-reform CCP (Chinese Communist Party) regime (Nyíri, 2001); nor are the policies of the Chinese government facilitating the connection between China and its overseas population as the basis for overseas nationalism (Liu, 2006) favored any longer. Instead, through the collaboration inside and outside China, contemporary politics in China are questioned, criticized and challenged on Weibo.

The cross-border transportation of information has been carried out since the early phase of Weibo in 2009. Twitter, a globally popular micro-blog service based in the U.S., played a significant role in setting up such transportation in the micro-blogsphere. Chinese Internet users used to be able to access Twitter, but in 2009 the Chinese government officially blocked it. At that time, a number of Chinese-speaking users on Twitter started transporting tweets into Weibo. Twitter users that tweeted in Chinese mainly consisted then of dissidents and users who were sympathetic to their cause, including journalists, lawyers, and human rights activists, etc., both inside and outside China, and those who remained in China were able to use technologies to circumvent the Firewall to tweet. One journalist, Steven, explained why he participated in these activities:

There are so many constraints on Weibo, so a lot of important information is missing. But on Twitter, you can see everything. What I and other Chinese Twitter users are doing is to bring the information we have on Twitter to Weibo, transporting it into the areas confined by the GFW (*Qiangnei*), so that

people living inside China without the technology of circumventing the firewall can be informed. What we're doing is trying to enlighten these people, by providing different perspectives (Personal communication, April 10, 2010).

Steven thinks highly of the mission of Chinese Twitter users, highlighting their role of “enlightening” the public inside China. The messages on Twitter were more radical, with many dissident users not able to register an account on Weibo. Although their endeavor to transport tweets to Weibo met substantial censorship pressure, it also made some key events and alternative perspectives visible in China.

This early wave of information transportation between Twitter and Weibo paved the way for further development of Weibo into a news platform connecting Chinese-speaking users inside and outside China. The established atmosphere of sharing encouraged the discussion of news and current affairs, though it did not lead to more freedom, because the state still imposes its control over the contents produced on Weibo. However, as previous chapters suggest, the means of both control and resistance have become more nuanced and flexible, and Weibo has survived within such a complexity.

As a response to the regional and global uprisings of recent years in both authoritarian and democratic countries—such as the Arab Spring, the London riots of August 2011, and the Occupy Wall Street movement in late 2011— the Chinese government strengthened the control of international information flow, especially on social media. The Chinese government recognized the potential of social media in cultivating public awareness of current social problems, motivating collective actions and social

movements. It thus further cut off the connection between China and the rest of the world through the Internet. Partly due to this circumstance, Weibo became a primary social media source for getting outside information. Journalists, together with other social groups (lawyers, business elites, and scholars) possessing a higher level of transnational mobility, actively participated in the transportation of information and continue to do so today.

For example, after the July 23 High-speed Railway Accident (2011), journalists and individuals with access to media resources outside China started posting images and audio-video links of the media coverage outside China, providing a different perspective that could not be easily seen within China, including further questioning of the Minister of Railway. Discussions on Weibo reflected their input: A Hong Kong-based *Ming Pao* journalist (@Xuj, July 29, 2011) posted a story about Hong Kong people publicly mourning the victims in the accident, followed by a protest joined by many mainland tourists, though public mourning was not allowed in China. Similarly, George, a former journalist in China who lives in Hong Kong, frequently pushed media images and posts across borders:

There is a wall between us. It is hard for people in China to see the news reports from Hong Kong. So I almost instinctively started to post the images of the pages of Hong Kong newspapers on Weibo. During the July 23 train accident, I posted a very sensational front page of *Apple Daily*, the best selling commercial newspaper in Hong Kong, which contained a very strong criticism of the local officials in China for quickly burying the

wrecked train. It was reposted tens of thousands of times. Then they (the government) realized this, and started to delete the postings of Hong Kong newspaper pages. Then I started to post those pages of pro-China newspapers in Hong Kong, which also have a lot of good topics that cannot be discussed in China (Personal communication, August 21, 2012).

This importation of information from outside the Great Firewall has challenged the unified version of a particular news event, providing more choices for the public to interpret and remember the event. In situations where traditional media are not allowed to report, the transnational Chinese platforms bring global media coverage to Weibo, making the event visible and memorable to a wider audience.

What happened in a small village called Wukan in Guangdong Province (Wukan Incident or Wukan Protests) illustrates the penetration of global media on Weibo by transnational Chinese platforms. In December 2011, the villagers of Wukan overthrew the local government after months of protest and petition for their farmlands, which had been illegally sold to real estate developers at very low prices by the local government. The battle between the villagers and local government reached a climax in mid-December, when police besieged the village and cut off its supplies. The only information about the village was transmitted by Western-based global media outlets, such as Reuters, the BBC and French Television, after journalists working for them managed to get into the besieged village with the secret help of villagers. The global media coverage of Wukan village was then cited by users with access to the media outlets, and their postings appeared on Weibo, all of which generated support for the villagers from inside China. In

this scenario, journalists' accounts provided first-hand details that could not otherwise be revealed to the domestic Chinese audience. Here is a post by a journalist with BBC's Chinese channel:

A villager from WK told BBC Chinese channel that the whole village was mourning Xue Jinbo, who died in the local police office.³⁸ It is said that over 7,000 people participated. The local government said Xue died of a heart attack, but his daughter said this was simply a lie. Xue's body was still being held by the police. The villagers said that they were required to sign an agreement with the official explanation for Xue's death; otherwise they would not return his body (@BBCLW, December 17, 2011).³⁹

In addition to the direct involvement of journalists in global media, other citizens also cited global media sources in their Weibo posts and further spread the message of the situation in Wukan.

Batiste Falvoz, a journalist from French Television, managed to enter WK village secretly on Friday. He confirmed the news that the village was besieged by police and the military force. The atmosphere in the village was strange. People saw a village that was totally autonomous and orderly. The villagers were all having meetings and discussing the next step. It is very rare in recent years in China. The confrontation between the villagers and the

³⁸ WK is used as a short form of the Chinese characters of Wukan, which became a sensitive word on the Internet during the protests.

³⁹ Xue Jinbo was one of the villager-elected representatives who were supposed to negotiate with the local government to solve the problems, but the local police caught him and put him in custody at the police office, where he died.

local government in WK has become a symbol of resistance
(@Yaogunbaxiaoxiong, December 17, 2011).

This user cited a foreign journalist's personal experience that helped the domestic Chinese audience understand the situation in the besieged village. His comment suggests that the villagers were able to maintain social order and make wise decisions, much better than what the corrupted local officials and the violent police did. This comment stands in strong contrast to the official description of Wukan's situation as chaotic. Under circumstances in which the Chinese state-controlled media are not allowed to cover a story, the Chinese staff working for Western-based media and Chinese individuals with access to these media can bring details into the Great Firewall area via Weibo to create their own version of the story.

The global connection of Weibo thus brings Chinese-speaking people inside and outside of China into closer proximity. With details of a topical event being shared as the event unfolds, the location of the event no longer just matters to a particular group. Instead, the collective memory of that event involves global sources.

For example, the 5.12 Earthquake in Sichuan (Wenchuan Earthquake, Magnitude 8.0) in 2008 is no longer a local memory that only matters to the people in Sichuan Province in China. As a large-scale disaster with extensive media coverage and online discussion, it attracted the attention of various global media as well as the overseas Chinese-speaking community. At the fourth anniversary, many overseas Chinese people participated in its commemoration on Weibo and continued inquiring about the cause of the large number of deaths and the whereabouts of public donations. As a former photojournalist living in

New York, Li Zhensheng noted in reaction to the news that a middle school building donated by the Hong Kong government after the earthquake had been torn down for a new commercial plaza:

Many global media outlets also reported this. A middle school built with a donation from the Hong Kong government after the earthquake was torn down to make way for a new commercial plaza. This truly hurts us, the overseas Chinese. We feel so angry. The Sichuan government should answer to Chinese people all over the world! (@Li Zhensheng, May 20, 2012).

As suggested above, the overseas Chinese shared the pain and suffering of the people affected by the earthquake and other disasters, and they expressed it through commemoration on Weibo. More importantly, the posts became a reminder to the public that there are still unsolved problems that cannot be neglected. Issues like corruption and the lack of transparency become a shared concern for the Chinese globally.

Not only do overseas Chinese have more access to events happening in China via Weibo, but domestic Chinese can also sympathize with what happens to a specific overseas Chinese community. Weibo serves Chinese users globally, and this enables the simultaneous sharing of instant updates of major news events outside China. The global simultaneity of the Chinese-speaking people reinforces the connection of Chineseness beyond national boundary. For example, news of the Boston bombing of April 2013 spread to China right after the incident took place. When a Chinese student died in the

bombing, that became the central concern of Chinese users during those days, with the memory of the incident constructed through their global input on Weibo.

Most of the Weibo posts focusing on Chinese citizens abroad and overseas Chinese target the Chinese government for its neglect of the interests of the overseas Chinese and its failure to protect its citizens abroad in times of difficulty. The 1998 riots in Indonesia were recalled quite frequently as an example of the Chinese government not taking action to stop the suffering of the Indonesian Chinese population, a step taken in the name of “no interference in internal affairs” (@Yekf, @Lizhensheng, @Dreamam). In the more recent situations of crisis taking place outside China, dispatched journalists started to pay more attention to the details of overseas Chinese and citizens abroad. For example, during the Japan Earthquake of March 2011, the lives of Chinese people in Japan became a focus of media coverage, including updates and criticism of the evacuation plans initiated by the Chinese government and an emphasis on the suffering of the Chinese in Japan. In May 2013, the entire crew of a Chinese-registered fishing boat was kidnapped by North Korea, but it was concealed for two weeks until the owner of the boat managed to post the news on Weibo. The story then received huge numbers of reposts and the Chinese government was called a “coward” for not only being unable to protect its citizens but also trying to conceal the crisis (@Wuhongfei, @sakura-ustc).

Thus, in the global connection made possible by transnational Chinese platforms on Weibo, the work of journalism no longer privileges the kind of patriotic messages that are represented by official discourses. Instead, it targets state power as it blocks free

information flow. Through this global connection, public events are represented and remembered differently from the state-media version, activity that strengthens the collective impulse of turning China into a democratic society with more equality, transparency, and freedom.

4.2 Comparison: China's "multiple others" as examples of civilized nations

On Weibo, liberal-minded groups of users have made a clear distinction between China and other nations through cross-national comparisons of past and present events in news coverage. This distinction constructs an ideal image of the nation that China should become in comparison with its multiple others, which include specific nation-states that are seen as examples for China, such as the United States, Japan, Taiwan, the transitional states in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, etc. In this process, liberal-leaning journalists and other social groups use what they understand as "universal values"—democracy, freedom of expression, human rights, and constitutionalism—to push the current regime of China to embrace the standard of a civilized nation. This version of an ideal, "civilized" China questions another version that also increasingly finds supporters on Weibo—an emphasis on "Chinese characteristics" that rule every aspect of the nation and society, initiated by the Party-state.

The construction of China's multiple others challenges nationalism as a state project. In that nationalism replaced communism as the dominant ideology in China after 1989 (Huang and Lee, 2003), scholarship over the past two decades has identified that the state-led nationalism in China in the reform era, particularly after the 1990s, has concentrated on recovering from the century of national humiliation (Callahan, 2004),

strengthening the nation through economic development and technology (Zhao, 2000) and calling for a just world order that matches China's national interests (Zheng, 1999). In the age of social media, debates over nationalism prevail, but, as shown in this chapter, the meaning of national interests has shifted, with China being repositioned in relation to its multiple "others."

With the establishment of global news networks and the international reach of national networks, journalistic practices have become more globalized, with global events more integrated into local discourse (Volkmer, 2002). While global news networks are predominantly Western-based, which marginalizes and shades the unique meaning of the local (Zelizer, 2011), this Western-based global coverage is still a useful tool in the Chinese context that can enrich both the global and local. For instance, the global sources of past and present are more accessible due to increasingly globalized journalistic practices, and the repertoire of global news coverage makes it easy to recall past events and form a distinction between China and its "others," as Kitty, a radio journalist, explains:

In the aftermath of the 2011 Earthquake in Japan, we saw the lives of ordinary people. We saw volunteers and professionals processing personal belongings and categorizing them, waiting to be claimed by families of the victims. The Japanese media and government also made all kinds of information publicly accessible, very clear and precise. We also recalled the news of train accidents in Japan when we saw accidents in China, but every time there were very detailed reports and we saw the officials apologize for

the accidents that we never saw in China. When we saw these, we started questioning why China can't act similarly (Personal communication, July 22, 2012).

This suggests that through local memories one can make sense of broader, global meanings of the past and present. Events with global visibility can be interpreted by invoking local memories. Instead of the global devouring the local, local events can find broader meanings when they are compared with past events in other parts of the world. Thus, the global-local exchange of past and present becomes a powerful critique of the present in China.

Weibo users have positioned China in the global society in relation to its global “others,” based on the imagination of what a “civilized nation” should look like, which significantly differs from the vision provided by the Party central with strong nationalistic and authoritarian meanings. While the “others” are portrayed quite differently from one another, each of them possesses at least one aspect that a “civilized nation” should have. The formation of “multiple others” is a consequence of the strategic use of events that are globally visible to locate and that can be mobilized to criticize the problems in China. These problems keep China distanced from the “civilized nations,” according to the liberal-minded Weibo users. At the core of “universal values,” which China rejects, are the interests and rights of individual citizens, so that boosting national wealth and international power comes at the expense of individual wellbeing.

The United States: Every individual matters

On Weibo, the United States is the most frequently cited example of an ideal model for China. Not only do news events taking place in the United States get more media coverage and public attention in China, but events taking place in local places in China are also frequently compared with earlier ones in the U.S. The United States is characterized as a nation and society that respects and values individual life, from all levels of officials to individual citizens.

The 10th anniversary of the September 11 attack became a very engaging topic on Weibo. Various commemorative activities and reports triggered memories of the tragedy and invited commentaries on the contemporary situation in China in comparison with the U.S. Recent disasters that had happened in China were revisited and brought to the forefront, showing a sharp contrast in terms of how individual lives are treated in major disasters in each location. In the following two Weibo posts, both users compared September 11 with recent disasters in China and criticized the practices of the Chinese government and officials in treating victims:⁴⁰

@CaijingNet: “Although ten years have passed since 911, there are still split opinions among Chinese netizens. However, no matter what kind of opinion you hold, there must be one thing in common: the hope that we live in a country where every individual life can be respected and well treated, regardless of one's social status. If there is a disaster, every one of us can become part of it, like 5.12, 11.15, and 7.23” (September 11, 2011).

⁴⁰ *@CaijingNet* is the official Weibo account of the website of Caijing Magazine (a financial magazine), and *@Yanghengjun* is a Chinese writer and columnist living abroad.

@Yanghengjun: “I remember the first time I watched the anniversary of 911, and I was impatient at the lengthy reading of the names of over 3,000 victims. However, when I saw that the president and all other officials were listening carefully with respect, compared to how our children in the (2008) earthquake in China were treated, I suddenly understood the meaning of (the name reading). In certain countries, if you dare to investigate the names of the victims, you will possibly become the next victim!” (September 11, 2011).

“5. 12,” “11.15,” and “7.23” are dates that marked major disasters in China over the past few years, natural and human-made -- the Sichuan Earthquake on May 12th, 2008, an apartment fire in Shanghai on November 15, 2010 killing 58 people, and a high-speed railway accident on July 23rd, 2011. Disasters like these were mentioned in the coverage of the 10th anniversary of September 11 on Weibo, highlighting the shared themes—the massive deaths in these disasters—and the divergent consequences. These posts suggest that the local governments in China responded poorly to the loss of individual lives. In contrast, regarding the September 11 attack, according to the liberal-leaning Chinese Weibo users, the Americans remember the past disaster very well, and the ways in which the government and public responded to and remembered the disaster should be a model for the Chinese. Messages on Weibo suggest that the Chinese officials should learn from the U.S, as the key is to respect every individual’s life, in the forms of annual public mourning, publicizing the victims’ names, preserving their belongings, and conducting thorough investigation into the causes of their deaths. All of these were absent in the major disasters that had happened in China.

September 11 not only mattered during its anniversaries, for it was also a frequently used example of the past with global visibility for its comparison with other disasters. For example, after the high-speed railway accident in July 2011, there is a post citing the past stories of September 11:

After 3,000 people died in September 11, the debris, including the steels and cement, were all moved to another place with careful processing and examination, in order to find any possible remains or personal belongings, which could help in identifying the victims. Whenever a small piece of the belongings of a victim was found and identified, it was handed to the families. This is how the Americans treat human life. This is a society where the universal values are totally embraced in the mainstream.

(@Xiaocuishihuashishuo, July 26, 2011).

Here the memory of September 11 was used to question the decision to bury the wrecked train right after the accident without further rescuing and processing it for bodies, not to mention the lack of efforts to identify the victims and reunite their belongings with their families. The poster pointed out that it is the “universal values” carried out in the U.S. that made the difference.

In addition to major disasters like September 11, there are news events in the United States that are frequently cited on Weibo on a daily basis, highlighting how individual lives are respected in the U.S. For example, an ID verified as a TV producer from China’s national television CCTV commented on Weibo after a movie theater shooting in Denver:

After the shooting took 12 lives in Denver, although most people say that this would not affect their interests in the movie *Dark Knight Rises*, the producers still immediately canceled the premiere celebration and other promotional activities. President Obama also announced that he would suspend his election campaign activities, and requested national flags be flown at half-mast for six days. How a society reacts to tragic events defines whether it qualifies a ‘civilized society’ (@Xuwenguang, July 21, 2012).

In this post he does not mention similar incidents in China, but the final sentence shows his point. He praises the public reaction in the United States in the face of such a tragedy, especially the government, for respecting the individuals who died in the incident, which according to him reflected the meaning of “civilization.” By contrast, coincidentally, on the same day (July 21, 2012 Beijing Time), a thunderstorm and flooding in Beijing took 77 lives, but the number was not released until pressure mounted from Weibo and other social media platforms. No public mourning activities were allowed. These two incidents were then used to make a comparison, throwing criticism at the local Beijing government for its poor reaction to the crisis and the lack of respect it showed for individual lives.

Another example is the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, which took place on December 14, 2012 in Connecticut, in which twenty children and six adults were killed. Coincidentally, on that same day, in Henan Province, China, a man killed 22 children at a rural primary school with a knife. In the Chinese case the local government tried to conceal the details and refused to publicize the list of names of the children who were killed, and the official media left little latitude for the story to develop. The case in the

United States, on the other hand, became an event with nationwide attention, with public mourning that extended from the president to ordinary citizens. This sharp contrast was highlighted on Weibo, showing that the two nations with different value systems led to totally different consequences. The individual lives (children) and people's right to know were seen as more respected in the U.S than in China.

In addition to criticizing the local government for not being able to protect the children and respect the dead, users also criticized the state media CCTV for its intended blindness to the Chinese case, providing extensive reports of the shootings in the United States but only a very brief mention of the tragedy that had happened at home. A writer posted on Weibo:

On December 14, 2012, both the United States and China had tragedies that involved the slaughtering of children. A 36-year-old man, Min, in China, killed 22 school children with a knife in a village primary school in Henan. A 20-year-old man, Adam, killed 28 people in a primary school in Connecticut with a gun. CCTV had intensive report of the gunshot, but selectively forgot Min's violent activities. Why? Is it because the lives of Chinese kids are worthless? (@Zuojia-tianyou, December 14, 2012).

The coincidence made the comparison even more powerful because the two similar incidents, happened almost at the same time, were seen to reflect how the two governments and societies understood the value of individual lives. In this global-local exchange, the two incidents received similar attention among Chinese Weibo users. Weibo not only emphasized what the state media did not highlight—what the Chinese

officials and society should learn from the United States—but also made the Chinese case more visible given that the mainstream media had paid less attention to it. By juxtaposing the two incidents, they were thus remembered together, even though the Chinese mainstream media intended to neglect the one in China. The comparison suggests that the Chinese media, as well as the government, are not paying respect to individual lives.

In these examples of major topical events related to the United States, the U.S. is imagined to be a more civilized nation because of its respect for individual lives, contrary to the attempts to cover up the information of victims and related evidence in the Chinese cases. The juxtaposition of similar events in China and the U.S is a collective effort made by Weibo users to critique the poor reactions to crisis among Chinese officials at all levels, leveled in order to hold the Chinese government accountable.

However, in order to portray the image of the U.S. as an ideal example for China, these users selectively talk about global and local news that involved the U.S. Several controversial issues and past events that are critical in the history of the United States are absent from their discussion, such as the wars in Iraq and Vietnam. This choice reinforces the image of the U.S. as an idealized “other” for China, while marginalizing certain important aspects of the U.S that might impair this model.

Japan: social order, transparency and responsibility

Japan is a neighboring country to China that has a similar cultural tradition and a similar experience of being forced to open its doors to rising Western powers. But Japan became a modern nation after a political reform of the mid-19th century, and the two countries were at war in the first half of the 20th century. The Sino-Japanese war (1937-1945) in

China, part of which became World War II, is the main reason for anti-Japanese sentiment among the Chinese public and in cyberspace. More recently, people were easily stirred up against the Japanese when a territorial dispute between the two countries arose because of the past.

Despite the contentious past, on Weibo Japan becomes one of China's multiple "others," a model for China due to its success in handling the earthquake in 2011 and other good behaviors during moments of crisis. Throughout these incidents, Japan is portrayed to be a modern and civilized nation, characterized by its well-maintained social order, rational publics, and responsible officials, all setting a good example for China.

The 2011 Earthquake in Japan is a remarkable moment on Weibo when journalists and the diasporic Chinese in Japan collaborated to report the news and collectively reflect upon the experience of China in comparison with similar situations in the past. Shortly after the earthquake, a large number of Weibo posts compared the two earthquakes, one in China in 2008 and the more recent one in Japan. These posts depicted what Japanese ordinary citizens, media, and officials had done in reaction to the earthquake, critiquing the Chinese government and the inappropriate practices of Chinese media a few years earlier.

First, Chinese journalists, people in the Japanese Chinese community, and Chinese citizens in Japan described the orderliness of the Japanese society after the earthquake and the rational behavior of citizens, comparing them with the behaviors of Chinese people in reaction to the same earthquake. The official Weibo account of *Southern*

Weekend (@nanfangzhoumo), a leading weekly newspaper in China, posted excerpts of stories on the earthquake.

[*Understanding Japan in the massive disaster*] The Japanese people have the spirits of calmness and persistence in the face of catastrophe. The more serious the disaster is, the more visible these spirits are. They are reflected in real life as tolerance, self-control, self-management and helping each other.

(@Nanfangzhoumo, March 17, 2013)

This excerpt attributes the well-maintained social order in the midst of such a huge disaster to the characteristics of the Japanese people, and it was positioned in contrast to what the Chinese did in the face of the pending danger of radiation caused by Japan's nuclear crisis after the earthquake. @*BreakingNews* posted a journalist's note depicting the orderliness he saw in the streets of Tokyo, as a sharp contrast to the panic salt buying in China after Japan's nuclear crisis.⁴¹ These contrasts between Japan and China were used as a critique of the lack of information transparency in China that had caused public panic – salt buying to offset the effects of radiation -- during moments of crisis.

Second, the narratives on Weibo by journalists and individual Chinese residents in Japan focused on different media practices displayed in two earthquakes in Japan and China. Media practices are considered an important component of a civilized society. While the media in Japan were portrayed as informative and rational, the media in China, whether they were reporting the earthquake in Japan or the one in Sichuan 2008, were seen as unprofessional. Professional media practices are understood as an important indicator of

⁴¹ The official Weibo account of Sina news center's 24/7 news updates

information transparency, which keeps the public informed and maintains social order in such a chaotic situation.

A Hong Kong-based TV host and news commentator Yang Jinlin (@Yangjinlin) attributed the orderliness of the Japanese people after the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis to the professional media practices in Japan, especially the public service television NHK. “They (the media) played the role of watchman for the public, reporting the most up-to-date news in a timely manner. The news anchors remain calm and stable while presenting the news, comforting the public emotions and guiding them to react properly to the changing situations” (March 13, 2011). @Nanfangzhoumo (*Southern Weekend*) also posted an excerpt from a feature story on how the Japanese media reported the earthquake, praising the Japanese media for professional practices that facilitated transparency and led to a well-informed, rational, and highly ordered society in moments of crisis.

The Chinese journalists expressed admiration for the high standard of professional conduct by the Japanese media, which the Chinese media had lacked in covering the Sichuan Earthquake in 2008. They praised the Japanese journalists for respecting victims—unlike the Chinese, the Japanese journalists would not disturb the victims if they did not want to be interviewed or photographed – and they were fascinated by the calm tone of the television newscast in Japan, which was interpreted as a sign of objectivity and rationality. By contrast, in 2008, during the coverage of the Sichuan earthquake, although Chinese media were given much more freedom than before there had been a lot of unprofessional and unethical conduct, such as interrupting the rescue

work for interviews and using an over-sentimental tone in news reports. These moments were recalled on Weibo during the earthquake in Japan. The Chinese journalists set up a model based on what they observed in Japan, emphasizing the importance of journalism in providing useful, objective, and rational information. All of these were codified as advanced and professional journalistic practices that reflected a nation's higher level of civilization.

Later, when China experienced additional disasters, Weibo users drew on the earthquake in Japan as a source from the past to criticize how the Chinese local government was reacting. For example, three days after the high-speed railway accident (July 23, 2011) in China, user @Weixiang, a Chinese native living in Japan, recalled her experience during the earthquake in Japan and posted two pictures and her comments:

My heart is bleeding. Here on the left is a picture taken after the earthquake in Japan this March. The soldiers from the Self Defense Forces found 56 school bags in the debris of a primary school in Fukushima. They cleaned them up, put them in plastic bags and waited for parents to claim them. On the right is a picture of collections of diplomas, wedding photos, displayed in different categories in a gym of a primary school at Miyagi (July 26, 2011).

This post was a response to the railway official's order to take immediate action to bury the wrecked trains. She posted two pictures from the Japan earthquake in the tweet to show how the Japanese local governments had treated the belongings of the dead,

showing respect to their memory. Similarly, on August 11, 2011, five months after the earthquake, a journalist in a Chinese newspaper in Japan posted,

The March 11 earthquake and tsunami happened nearly five months ago. The Japanese government has been publishing the latest update of numbers of deaths, missing people, and people in the shelter. All major newspapers publish this on their pages. However, look at China, the information about missing people in the high-speed railway accident is still not publicized. This is unbelievable! (@ribenqiaobaoduan, August 11, 2011).

At that time, the July 23 High-speed Railway Accident in China had been listed as a sensitive topic by the Chinese government, and all kinds of commemorations, inquiries, and investigations initiated by citizens had been banned. While the Japanese officials respected the memories of the disaster and actively contributed to the building of its memories, the Chinese government made every effort to render extinct the memories of disasters that it does not favor. These reflect a fundamental difference between the governments of the two countries, as they are based on different values. The responsible attitude of the Japanese government is a sharp contrast to the Chinese government's indifference and lack of responsibility in the high-speed railway accident.

In reaction to the high-speed railway accident, journalists, writers, and media in China dug out past railway accidents in Japan as a critique of negligence on the railway officials in China. The posts on Weibo depicted the quick reaction of Japanese officials and railway executives to public inquiries. They made timely compensation and public

apologies and readily followed legal procedures. All of these actions made a strong contrast to the cases in China:

Let's continue talking about the derailing accident in Japan, 2005. In addition to compensation and apologies, the Japanese government and the railway company held a public mourning ceremony for people who died in this accident. In the nearby farming land, the written word "life" reminds people about respecting life. The tragedy forced the Japanese government and the parliament to revise the regulation of railway service, in order to prevent such a disaster from happening (@ZhiriJP, July 27, 2011).

Phoenix TV is now broadcasting: The CEO of West Japan Railway Company was accused of "professional negligence" for the derailing accident six years ago...(@Zhangyihe, July 29, 2011)

The compensation process for the derailing accident that cost 107 lives six years ago in Japan has already ended, but the legal procedure continues. Yesterday, the case of West Japan Railway CEO was taken to court, amid accusations of "professional negligence." (@Laorong, July 29, 2011)

All of the above examples indicate that in a civilized society, officials should be responsive to public inquiries, ready to bear the consequence of their mistakes and take responsibility. The discussions on Weibo emphasized a strong sense of guilt among Japanese officials and corporate executives when accidents take place under their charge. Adopting a sense of responsibility and making apologies to the public have never been a common practice among Chinese officials.

In sum, Japan is represented on Weibo as a model for China due to its social order, rational citizen behaviors, professional media practices, openness of information access and, most importantly, the society and government's willingness to admit and learn from their mistakes. All of these reflect certain aspects of the "universal values" that lead to a civilized nation and society, and China still has a long way to go. However, the construction of Japan as a model for China also involves the neglect of elements that are inevitable in the past relationship between the two countries. The Sino-Japanese war (1937-1945), including Japan's colonial experience and violence against Chinese civilians (e.g. the Nanking Massacre), does not suit the purpose of idolizing Japan for China. Although the war has been mentioned under certain circumstances such as national memorial days, there have not been extensive reflections that might lead to a more comprehensive understanding of Japan, one that includes its deficiencies as part of the model of a civilized nation.

Taiwan: a model of democracy for Chinese society

Taiwan is frequently used as a comparison to China, mainly for its successful democratic transition in the past decades, the first of its kind in a Chinese state. What makes Taiwan a unique "other" to China is its achievement in democratization while sharing the same culture. During my study, there were several moments that highlighted Taiwan on Weibo, strengthening it as an example of democracy and constitutionalism for China. The centenary commemoration of the 1911 Revolution and the founding of the Republic of China (October 10, 2011) are primary examples.

The 1911 Revolution happened in China, when the imperial regime of the Qing Dynasty was overthrown and the Republic of China established, the first republican state in China. The Republic of China was the only legitimate state in China from 1912 to 1949, with the Nationalist Party ruling the nation since 1927. A civil war (1946-1949) between the Nationalists and the Communists took place after the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). The Nationalists lost the civil war and fled to Taiwan, and the national title of Republic of China has been used there since then. After nearly forty years of authoritarian rule by the Nationalist Party, Taiwan started its democratization process in the 1980s. In 2000, the first presidential election was held and an opposition party leader won. As a result of the complexity involved in the China-Taiwan relation, the centenary of the 1911 Revolution, celebrated by both sides, became an opportunity to recall the democratization process in Taiwan since the late 1980s, using it as a critique of the authoritarian government in China.

The achievements of Taiwan during the past six decades are used to criticize the present reluctance in China toward constitutionalism and democracy. The discourse led by journalists on Weibo celebrated the successful democratic transition of Taiwan. They depicted a problematic China and an idealized Taiwan (Republic of China) through several dichotomies -- authoritarianism in China versus democracy in Taiwan, a lawless society in China versus governance by law in Taiwan, a distorted Chinese culture by the Communists in China and an authentic Chinese culture preserved in Taiwan, media censorship in China versus freedom of expression in Taiwan, and the Chinese (PRC) government's refusal to face the historical mistakes versus the Taiwanese (ROC)

government's self-reflection on historical mistakes (e.g. the official's denial of the "great famine in China" vs. the president's public apology of 2.28 Incident in Taiwan⁴²).

Some critics went further to argue that there is another day that is more important and more worth remembering than October 10th (the anniversary of the 1911 Revolution), as illustrated in a post by writer @Beicun:

"There is one day that is at least as important as October 11, 1911, or even more worthy of remembering—May 20, 2000. On that day, China turned its back to revolution and authoritarianism, moving toward constitutionalism and the rule of law. If you admit the principle of 'one China', it is the ending, but also the beginning" (@Beicun, October 10, 2011).⁴³

This post goes beyond remembering the 1911 Revolution in conjunction with Taiwan. The revolution itself did not bring democracy directly to Taiwan, as Taiwan also experienced decades of dictatorship under the Nationalist Party reign. However, the Nationalist government was willing to reform the political system, at the expense of losing its power as a ruling party. According to @Beicun, a more significant contribution of the Republic of China (subsequently Taiwan) to China is the idea of constitutionalism and the rule of law, which led to democracy in Taiwan. He also suggests that the successful democratization of Taiwan can eventually benefit China, because the two societies share cultural values—as Taiwan can successfully turn into a democratic society, China has no reason to fall behind.

⁴² 2. 28 Incident refers to Taiwanese people protesting against the Nationalist Party in February 1947, and the subsequent military crackdown of the protesters and Taiwanese intellectuals.

⁴³ He refers the presidential election in Taiwan as an event that is relevant to the whole Chinese community, including China.

The centenary commemoration of the 1911 Revolution shows that a group of Chinese intellectuals and journalists as opinion leaders on Weibo recognize Taiwan as the authentic representative of the Chinese culture and a model of democratization for China. Most of the participants in the discussion on Weibo are from China, and some of them visited Taiwan during the commemoration and the presidential election in late 2011, and they reported on Weibo about their observations of Taiwanese society and their interactions with local people. Interestingly, although these users considered Taiwan part of China, as suggested by the Chinese official statement, the reason they cite is quite different from the official's unclear and ambiguous sovereignty statement. They believe that Taiwan represents ideal Chineseness because it incorporates the ideas of "universal values," such as freedom of expression, democracy, and constitutionalism. For them, Taiwan's example indicates that democracy can be realized in Chinese societies, and China should be no exception. It has to follow Taiwan's example to take further steps toward political reform.

States under transition and dictatorship: friends and enemies redefined

The examples of the U.S, Japan, and Taiwan are frequently cited on Weibo as stable "others" of China. In addition to these stable "others," certain circumstances produce more transient versions of multiple others for China. These include the recent transition of authoritarian states, such as those in the Arab Spring and recent reforms in Burma. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist regimes in Eastern Europe are also constantly revisited. The downfall of dictators, the abolishing of media censorship, and the release of dissidents were celebrated by liberal-leaning groups of users on Weibo.

These people pay close attention to changes happening in the world, showing admiration of the people, political leaders, and media in transitional states and urging the Chinese government to be more open to further reform. Other than these, there is one unique example, North Korea, which is viewed as the past of China during the Mao era, an example that China should not follow.

For most liberal-leaning users, transitional states thereby act as multiple others that set approachable examples for how China might transform. These regimes were viewed as repressive for a long time, and some were even seen as worse than China. Now that they are stepping out of the camp of dictatorship and moving toward democracy, they are imagined as China's future.

In August 2011, when Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese oppositional politician recently released from house arrest, met the newly elected president as they reached an agreement to make a further step toward democratization (@shunjiandeguangmang), @M.Gao commented, "Now people in Burma see the dawn. Only Iran, North Korea, China, Cuba, and Venezuela are left" (August 22, 2011). After the death of the Libya leader Gaddafi, @Yekz (columnist, media critic) commented, "The Libyan people can finally go to the public square freely to celebrate their festival. Seeing this picture (of Libyan people celebrating Gaddafi's death), I feel as if it were happening to us. ...Today, Libyan people do not have to believe in lies any more. After the downfall of Gaddafi, who's next?"

Liberal-minded users on Weibo categorize the world into two camps, the democratic and the authoritarian, and they define China's friends and enemies accordingly. According to them, transitional states are actively seeking democracy after decades of repression, but

the Chinese government, along with a few remaining countries, worships dictatorship and puts pressure on those countries seeking democracy and embracing “universal values.”

The two quotes above show that China (the CCP regime) is often listed in the camp of dictatorship, as not only a repressive force to its own people but also fueling the authoritarian governments. In the eyes of liberal-minded Weibo users, China needs to find a way out and join the club of democracy. Otherwise the Chinese leaders will experience the same fate of the dictators and China will never be truly respected in the global society.

The simplified differentiation by this group of Weibo users between China’s perceived friends and enemies becomes a convenient tool widely used in interpreting global news and urging the Chinese government to join the “right side.” This group of Weibo users celebrates the downfall of dictators, posting warning signs to the Chinese government. They also make efforts to remember those who had made great contributions to democratization in their countries. For example, people reacted differently to the news of the deaths of former post-Communist Czech president Vaclav Havel and the North Korean leader Kim Jong Li, suggesting that China should choose the right path and not follow North Korea. As one post noted:

Today we heard of the death of two persons: Kim and Havel. One is a dictator, and the other was the president after overthrowing the dictatorship. How would people understand the meaning of power seeing the two cases? (@Zhouyj, December 19, 2011).

Similarly, a lawyer and professor (@Heweifang) criticized China's diplomatic strategy by posting an excerpt from his blog on Weibo, titled "Close to dictatorship, far from democracy," which says, "What we need to think about is whether an authoritarian neighbor is really good for us. If we consider a country with dictatorship as a good neighbor, and in relation to all other nations in the world, if we choose to form a liaison with authoritarian countries and keep distance from the democratic ones, this would illustrate that what we (China) value are not democracy and freedom" (December 20, 2011).

In the above examples, these users clearly point out that dictatorship is not good for the Chinese people and global order. While China seems to be much better than what is perceived as the worst case (North Korea), the Chinese government's befriending of dictators is considered a threat to the well being of the Chinese people and China's image in the world. These users strongly urge the Chinese government to stop supporting the regimes of North Korea and Syria, for they are repressing their people.

North Korea is a special case among these less stable "others" for China. It is often seen as the past of China, the past to which the Chinese people do not want to return, because it in many ways resembles the Cultural Revolution period. A former TV journalist @Wanglifan commented on a post cited in a news report from South Korea, about the North's transition of leadership: "This country has no hope. Poor people! But whenever I see them, it feels like I am looking at the Chinese people thirty years ago. The feeling is

strengthening in the midst of the nationwide ‘singing red songs’ campaign⁴⁴ recently in China.” (@Wanglifan, August 15, 2011)

There are specific signs that make people fear China’s regression to its past, which have been discussed on Weibo. These signs include not only the “singing red songs” campaign and its media endorsement, but also Chinese leaders’ speeches that indicate the relevance of Mao’s thoughts, the strict control over discussions on topics such as the Cultural Revolution, and the government’s constant support of countries like North Korea. The constant othering of North Korea reminds the contemporary Chinese people how terrible living in China used to be. These conversations suggest that if no further reform is under way, China will be no better than its neighbor.

On Weibo, the repositioning of China in the web of democratic and authoritarian countries also involves the critique of Chinese media practices. The official media as the mouthpiece of the Chinese government and the “fifty-cent party” (wumao dang)⁴⁵ were blamed for speaking for the dictators and cultivating a “wrong worldview” in the public by standing in line with dictators, showing no sympathy to people in those countries who were suffering.

Even some journalists from the Party newspapers argue on Weibo that the Chinese official media’s coverage of global news such as the Arab uprisings was not fair. For

⁴⁴ “Singing red songs” is a nationwide campaign that mobilizes people to learn and sing the songs popular in Mao’s era. These songs contain revolutionary themes and idolization of Mao. It intends to bring back the “revolutionary spirit” and orthodox of Mao Zedong’s thoughts, but it is generally viewed by those liberal-minded people as a dangerous sign of the revival of Cultural Revolution in 21st century China.

⁴⁵ This is a group of people paid by the state at all levels to monitor online opinions. They are officially called “online commentators”. They are responsible for adding comments at posts, emphasizing positive things of the government. The “fifty-cent party” is a derogative term of this group, as it is known to the public that for one comment they post, they will be paid 50 cents RMB.

example, a journalist from *Global Times*, affiliated with the *People's Daily*, commented on the Chinese government's support of the Syrian government repressing the revolution, "My heart was pained when seeing on Al-Jazeera the Syrian people holding signs with anti-China messages" (@Qiuyz, October 5, 2011). He criticizes the Chinese government for its support of dictatorship in those countries for its own interests, neglecting the suffering of their people. The state-controlled media in China are perceived as selective and biased, speaking for the authoritarian government instead of the people. Posts like this suggest that to support the dictators is to be an accomplice with evil, and China and its media are being "unjust" to the Middle Eastern peoples, reflecting the underlying value held by the Communist Party leaders ruling the country, which they should be ashamed of in the face of the people in these countries.

On Weibo, multiple others are constructs crafted from the juxtaposition of global and local events in the past and present. In this process, global and local events can be remembered in the context of each other, as powerful critiques of the current regime. Multiple others suggest a difference between the Chinese government's international alliances and the Chinese people's imagination of the real friends China should make. Those countries under democratic transition are highly praised, as they are about to join the democratic camp, regardless of the current chaotic situation they are experiencing.

While the Party-state's maintenance of a vision of China's future with "Chinese characteristics" and the rejection of "Western" ideas such as "universal values" has been received nationwide, on Weibo liberal-leaning users call on multiple others to claim that China is not yet a good leader in the global world. It is so, according to them, because China

has not yet reached the standard of a civilized nation. For this group of Weibo users, China needs now a fundamental change in the value system underlying the current ruling power. What matters for China's position in the world is the state's willingness to embrace "universal values," which will form a national image and a meaning of being Chinese that are welcomed and respected in the global world.

4.3 Compassion: toward a global membership and a respectful nation

The global-local news flow, as fashioned through Weibo, produces a "global membership," a collective belonging in which national interests are no longer the primary concern. The formation of global membership is established through retrospection and reflection upon the past, and journalists are its leading voices.

This global membership requires more rational and sympathetic attitudes toward the "others" of China, as liberal-leaning journalists and other social groups take the lead here in the development of the idea of what a global membership on Weibo might look like. Though it is still an expression of nation-based identity, it also reflects a strategy to contest the popular version of nationalism that is filled with radical and narrow-minded patriotism. In short, it promotes an idealized China that can be respected in global society.

Scholars in the past decade have pointed out that the Chinese media, especially the market-oriented ones, have been actively participating in the formation of popular nationalism since the 1990s. This state-led nationalism permeated the popular discourse through journalism and popular culture, and it profited from stirring up nationalist sentiments, particularly anti-Americanism (Lee, 2003). The Internet also played a

significant part in the popular version of nationalism, with some scholars (e.g. Liu 2005) believing that the Internet offers a space for alternative versions of nationalism in the face of a clash of national interests (such as in the anti-Japan protests in China). However, others hold a cautious attitude toward cyberspace, holding that it promotes radical nationalism rather than liberal democracy, such as the case of cyberspace reaction to the 1998 Indonesian Chinese-exclusion riots (Hughes, 2006).

Popular nationalism involves a xenophobic view of the other and specifically expresses hostility toward the Western world, particularly the U.S. It easily mobilizes large numbers of people to organize collective actions against the Western powers, whenever China experiences moments of crisis or remembers “national humiliation.” In contrast, in the new approach developed on Weibo, shared human value is considered more important than the national interest in events that involve a conflict of interest between China and others, or disasters in other nations. Liberal-leaning Weibo users advocate for sympathy to others, regardless of national interests. Riots and other forms of violent activities targeting a certain “other” are not favored on Weibo.

Two cases that occurred during the course of my study illustrate the meaning of global membership—the 10th anniversary of September 11 and the anti-Japanese riots during a territory dispute in 2012. Global membership suggests sympathy across national boundaries, in which national interests are no longer the priority in understanding moments of crisis in other nations and national conflicts. That is, people should not celebrate other people’s suffering simply because they are not one of “us” and the nation they belong to is portrayed in the official discourse as that of “our enemy.” In Weibo’s

discussion of the 10th anniversary of the September 11 attack, most of the posts recalled the Chinese people's collective applause of the attack on hearing the news ten years earlier. Now, liberal-leaning groups of Weibo users consider this kind of activity not only inappropriate but also shameful, seeing it as the product of the long-time indoctrination of official education and propaganda efforts that had emphasized the "Western anti-Chinese forces"—imagined enemies created by the state. As two posts argued:

Ten years ago, I was a junior college student. My classmates, on hearing the news, were applauding in the classroom. At that time I was also a brainwashed young man, but during that moment, I started to feel that the applause was disgusting. It was actually a very important moment in my life. At least I began to realize that I couldn't let my child become such a cold-blooded applauding onlookers (@Yekf, September 11, 2011).

Ten years ago, September 11, 2011, I was in high school. That evening everybody was studying in the classroom, and my teacher came and told us what had happened in the United States. I remember clearly that the whole classroom was filled with the sound of applause, including mine. Now when I think of this, I would say, at that time we were terrible (@Nanfangzhoumo XP, September 11, 2011).

What these two posts by Chinese journalists reflect are the changing attitudes toward the catastrophe over the past ten years, particularly the feeling of shame for the celebratory activities in which they participated in the past. Posts like these two were quite common

on Weibo in discussions of the 10th anniversary of September 11, a sign that the anti-American mentality in the public has gradually faded. Instead, more and more people have started to consider the disaster as not only relevant for Americans but also “a disaster of the whole human race” (@Yangjl, @zhangyh, September 11, 2011).

These examples illustrate a gradual change in the sense of collective identification among some Chinese people. People are considering the national-based identification problematic, advocating identity based on a shared value system.

For liberal-leaning intellectuals, journalists, media practitioners, and some business elites, the hatred toward “American imperialists” is an irrational expression, a narrow-minded nationalism that results from patriotic education and a Cold War mentality. Such hatred is considered an uncivilized behavior of a nation and its people, and although it is still visible in Chinese public discourse, Weibo offers a place to contest it and to call for further reflection. Here are two examples:

Ten years later, now there are still people celebrating the attack. Conspiracy theory, class struggle, and hatred education have had a bad influence on several generations in China. These are characteristic of a closed and authoritarian society (@Wangwei, September 13, 2011).

I hope more people could write about the moment they heard the news of 911, as a way to remember the innocent victims and the day that changed the world. Whether we have a universal compassion and empathy for all human beings, whether we can freely report and express our opinions about things like 911, matter a lot to our own future (@Wangran, September 13, 2011).

These tweets argue that the only way that China and the Chinese people can be respected in a global society is to reflect upon the past, eradicate narrow-minded nationalism and hatred toward others, and show empathy toward others. These posts contest anti-American sentiments and popular nationalism, emphasizing the “universal values” that China should embrace. These posts have become more prominent with the increasing transnational mobility of Chinese citizens and accessibility of global sources.

The idea of global membership and the underlying “universal values” from which it derives are also reflected in the advocacy for a rational attitude toward other nations. The call for the “rational” expression of patriotic messages has become very popular during the new waves of anti-Japanese protests in multiple cities in China, taken in reaction to the escalating territorial dispute between the two countries that began in mid-August, 2012. Protests soon escalated to riots, as people started to smash Japanese-brand cars, restaurants serving Japanese food and stores selling Japanese products, using violence against Japanese citizens in China. Liberal-minded Weibo users pointed out that the riots in China were based on a simplified, one-sided, narrow-minded understanding of Japan and the territorial dispute between the two countries.⁴⁶ According to these users, the riot was reminiscent of the Boxer Rebellion,⁴⁷ the Cultural Revolution, and the rise of Nazi Germany in the past, all of which had been powerful in mobilizing huge numbers of people and causing large-scale riots in society. Liberal-leaning users strongly opposed

⁴⁶ The territorial dispute between China and Japan involves the Diaoyu Islands (called Senkaku Islands in Japan).

⁴⁷ The Boxer Rebellion (or Yihetuan Movement) occurred in China between 1899 and 1901 in northern China. The participants were mainly peasants. It supported the Qing court and mainly targeted foreigners, especially the Christian missionaries, as they believed the Western invasion was the cause of their loss of livelihood.

violence and extremist expressions—the hotbed of totalitarianism. As two users suggested:

The long-time education imposed the idea of hatred between nations, a distorted picture of the global world, and the wrong value system. The whole nation is xenophobic, with no respect for the rule of law, freedom, and constitutionalism. The tradition of Boxers has been strengthened in the Cultural Revolution. Now nationalism is dangerous to the nation... (@Zhuzhiyong, September 15, 2012).

People asked me, as the descendant of an anti-Japanese war hero, why I wasn't angry (about the Japanese). Many people are so outrageous that they even want to get weapons to occupy the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. I said, no, please don't be excited. I have only one enemy—people who oppose human rights. I don't care what citizenship he/she holds. Hitler also mobilized people with nationalism, but look at what happened... (@Longcan, September 15, 2012).

The first post situates the anti-Japanese riots today in a tradition that has lasted for a century—the extreme violence and xenophobia toward the “other,” especially Western society. While the Boxers in the early 20th century opposed the Westerners, especially Christian missionaries, the riots today reject the idea of “universal values” by using violence against ordinary citizens and their properties. The second post juxtaposes popular nationalism in China with the rise of Nazi Germany. The posts shows that regardless of the different historical contexts, there are some shared values (e.g. human

rights) that need to be placed higher than the nation-state and national interests, suggesting that patriotism is always manipulated by the state to create obedient subjects for the interests of dictators.

However, the advocacy of rational behavior toward other nations is rooted in a strong national concern, aimed at promoting China as a respectful nation in the world. Scholar @ZWdewenzhang posted about the negative effects of the riots on China's image in the global society:

Those who participated in the riots (beating, smashing, and robbing) in the name of “anti-Japanese” and “patriotism” were “invading China” and “doing harm to the country.” In the era of advanced Internet technology, these violent activities can reach worldwide audiences in a few seconds, causing the resentment of China in the global world, which may actually put China in a disadvantaged position in the territorial dispute (@ZWdewenzhang, September 15, 2012).

Posts like that above implicitly or explicitly point out that the riots brought shame to the Chinese when viewed by global media and other nations. In this sense the liberal-leaning users have an idea of what a nation China should be like, and they also have a strong desire of their nation to be fully respected globally. They argue that the only way that China can truly be respected in the world is to abandon the irrational mentality and narrow-minded nationalism derived from the past and to

embrace “universal values” and take the “route to civilization.” To behave rationally is a way to achieve this goal. As liberal-leaning groups embrace global membership, trying to “enlighten” the larger public by pointing out the long-time indoctrinated resentment over Western imperialism, the “enlightenment” they envision is premised upon a recognition of “universal values,” seen as an essential part of Chinese national identity in this globally connected world.

4.4. Conclusion

The global-local news flow on Weibo produces an ideal image of China that can challenge the Party-led view that emphasizes the “Chinese characteristics” of an advanced nation under the leadership of the Communist Party. The image produced on Weibo through liberal-leaning users is based on “universal values” that China should embrace. Through global-local information exchanges, these liberal-leaning users produce their meaning of a new Chinese identity, which has three components—connection, comparison and compassion—that together compete with the nationalistic discourse promoted by the Party-state.

Typically, this has involved transnational Chinese platforms connecting the Chinese people globally by circumventing the Great Firewall and other means of censorship, the comparison of news events in other nation-states with those in local places in China to set examples of a civilized nation for China, and advocacy for a global membership for the Chinese-speaking population—a compassion beyond nationality. All of these strategies play to the idea of “universal values,” a set of ideas that emphasizes individual human rights, freedom of expression, democracy, and constitutionalism, all rooted in the

development of modern Western society. These ideas are recognized by liberal-minded Weibo users as the basic components of a civilized society and respected nation in the global world.

Collective memory takes a different shape and plays an important part in the global-local news flow that produces the new Chinese national identity. First, transnational Chinese platforms introduce various details about news events that cannot be easily accessed inside the Great Firewall. With the input of different perspectives and sources, the event can be remembered by the public in a different version from the official one. Second, through the comparison between China and its multiple others, both global and local pasts receive more significance: Local events do not lose meaning in the presence of more visible global events, as they act together to mobilize criticism of the current regime. Third, the idea of global membership is derived from the critical reflection of the narrow-minded nationalism and hatred toward other nations and people in the past, reinforcing the rational and sympathetic attitude toward other (nations) in order for China to become a respectful nation in the world.

This new Chinese national identity, as it is formed on social media platforms, is particularly important at a moment in which China is facing social transition. At this critical moment, the broader debate over the routes that China should take has begun to become prevalent on Weibo – Chinese characteristics versus universal values. The latter vantage point, as it has been constructed through the engagement of liberal-minded users with the global flow of information on Weibo, in many ways challenges the meaning of being Chinese and China's future route as shown in the former one. But that is no

guarantee that the former will not surface as well, and signs have only recently begun to point in that direction. The conflict between the two escalated after a series of articles published on Party newspapers criticizing “universal values” being widely circulated on Weibo in 2013.

Nonetheless, the efforts of liberal-minded users have had effect. First, the global connection through Weibo breaks the firewall and other means of insulating China from the global information flow. In changing how people inside and outside China are represented to one another, it has substantially challenged the image that Chinese people all over the world are celebrating China’s achievement in the global stage, as promoted by official discourse. While in 2008, the Beijing Olympics torch relay and the Sichuan Earthquake mobilized a collective patriotic expression via journalism and the Internet in Chinese communities globally (see Han, 2011), this kind of nationalism beyond China is no longer dominant in recent years in public discourse. Instead, social media sites like Weibo have provided competitive sources that produce different pictures of Chinese communities across the globe.

Second, this new Chinese identity is a powerful response to recent attempts at nullifying “universal values” and their associated ideas, as executed by the Party-led media and scholarly work in China, which have begun to be visible on Weibo. These efforts attempt to “downgrade” ideas like democracy and constitutionalism as “local knowledge” rather than “universal values,” in order to promote “Chinese characteristics” and thus reject political reform that may threaten the current authoritarian regime. The new meanings of being Chinese, as promoted by liberal-leaning users, remain a useful way of calling for

political reform. Overall, the new meaning of being Chinese has become an antithesis to the idea of the “Chinese dream,” a slogan of China’s new generation of leadership that addresses its “national revival” in the global world.

Transnational Chinese platforms have further connected the Chinese people across the world through Weibo in general ways. In particular, people outside the Great Firewall have introduced information that was previously not always available to those who are inside the Wall, challenging the authority and dominance of the state-owned media and official discourses about most public events. The shared experience of major news events through the platform of Weibo across national boundaries bypasses the possible biases of the state media and provides multiple versions of a story. It overturns the image of Chinese overseas as a homogeneous group expressing loyalty to the homeland China, an image created by official and state-owned media. Instead, the firsthand information updates of people living outside China on Weibo highlight the more diverse experiences of Chinese overseas and their criticisms of the Party-state.

China’s multiple others, formed through global news that involves particular nation-states, generate an idealized version of China’s prospective future. Weibo offers a space in which the official version of nationalism emphasizing China’s superiority in the world has been contested. Weibo allows its users to interpret and remember topical events within the framework of “universal values.” Among the liberal-leaning Weibo users, different nations, except for North Korea, are held up as examples from which China has to learn. Commenting on cases in other countries is a way for liberal-leaning Weibo users to avoid the consequence of directly criticizing the Party-state system. More importantly,

the primary concern for this liberal-minded group is for China to choose the “right path,” to join the democratic club, to incorporate “universal values,” and to keep its distance from “dictator friends” such as North Korea. For them, this path can make China and the Chinese people well respected in the world. They believe that rapid economic development, the successful Olympic games, or the rapid growth of high-speed railway train technologies should not come at the expense of individual wellbeing. While this attempt to idealize other nations and consider them China’s models is also biased and selective, it is a useful tool to voice criticism.

Liberal-leaning Weibo users contest the popular version of nationalism in public discourse with the formation of global membership—compassion for other nations regardless of national interests. They criticize xenophobic and irrational expressions and activities toward other nations, linking them to the inheritance of the past, such as the Boxers and the Cultural Revolution. The notion of global membership requires respecting individual lives, regardless of their nationalities, with an assumption of shared emotions across national boundaries among human beings. Therefore, people should have sympathy for the suffering of others and not judge others simply based on nationality and resentment toward Western imperialism. The examples of reflections ten years after the September 11 attack and the criticism of anti-Japanese riots in this chapter illustrate this strategy. The narrow-minded nationalism that has been popular among ordinary Chinese citizens is seen to be a result of the indoctrination of the CCP regime. Weibo users see this simplified understanding of self and other, popularized and endorsed by media and popular culture, as highly problematic and easily manipulated by the authoritarian regime. Instead, the idea of global membership calls for sympathy across national

boundaries and rejects radical expressions of nationalism, in order to push for the current regime to embrace the new Chineseness that can be respected in the global society.

However, Weibo has its own limitations in the global-local news flow that shape the meaning of being Chinese. While it offers a space for alternative opinions to contest the Chinese national identity produced by official discourse, it favors certain groups in Chinese society that have higher mobility and more access to global sources. This cannot reflect the whole picture of China in the global world. Weibo's limitation is also the limitation of these groups of people, who are more globally oriented but at the same time cannot respond to problems that are directly related to local experiences but marginalized by this global orientation.

5. Weibo and the search for Chinese modernity

How can journalism empower citizens by enabling them to engage with reporting, sharing and remembering public events on social media in a transitional society? This study has attempted to answer this question by examining a Chinese social media site, Weibo. It examined journalism in the context of three sets of tensions that are prevalent in social media—control/resistance, past/present, and global/local. These three tensions were shown to work inseparably. This concluding chapter summarizes the main findings of this study, and discusses their broader implications in the study of journalism and contentious politics, as well as the search for Chinese modernity.

This study has shown that Weibo displays a patterned response to topical events. Ordinary citizens experience or witness an event and on-site journalists who are forbidden by the state to publish the story tweet their firsthand accounts on Weibo. Their firsthand accounts become the raw material of the event. The posts on Weibo are then retweeted by followers of these users, including other journalists, media institutions, and ordinary citizens. With the huge number of reposts, people add their comments to express opinions, situating the event in a network of past events with global commentary so it has broader meanings. When the news of a certain event is spread further and reaches a significant number of reposts (usually about 10,000), state prohibition is no longer effective, and the event becomes a new keyword in public discourse. The online reactions also lend support to offline collective actions. These collective efforts put pressure on the local government that is the target of the blame. It often forces the traditional media and

local/central government to follow up, take action or merely attest to the existence of public response.

My online ethnographic study of Weibo started with the 2011 earthquake in Japan. It concludes here with an incident that directly involved journalists and media institutions – the *Southern Weekend* incident of January 2013. The analysis of this incident that follows serves as the concluding discussion that recapitulates the main findings of this study. The incident also made evident a new dimension in the ongoing debate about Chinese modernity, which is also discussed in the following pages.

On the morning of January 3, 2013, the readers of the first issue of *Southern Weekend* (*Nanfang Zhoumo*)⁴⁸ of 2013 got their usual annual New Year's Letter. The letter is an annual editorial that thematically summarizes key words of the past year and expresses the newspaper's vision of the coming year, which is more of a statement of the newspaper's mission and standpoint. However, in the year of 2013, the *Southern Weekend* staff was shocked to see that the customary New Year's Letter, titled "Chinese Dream, a Dream of Constitutionalism" and penned by renowned commentator Dai Zhiyong, had been replaced after the final proof had been approved and ready for print. The *Southern Weekend* staff reported the incident on Weibo.

The New Year's Letter of 2013 that was replaced provided a vision of constitutionalism for China. The text maintained that this political reform was a prerequisite for China to become a civilized nation, one in which the rights of all citizens could be protected:

⁴⁸ This leading Chinese weekly newspaper is famous for its investigative reports and its critical view of the current political system.

Only under constitutionalism can the nation enjoy continuous prosperity. Only when the dream of constitutionalism is realized, can we protect our nation's freedom in the world, and the rights of our people. The freedom of the nation must be based on the freedom of the people, which is grounded in the situation that everyone can say whatever they want to say, and can dream whatever they can dream.⁴⁹

According to the *Southern Weekend* staff, the article that replaced the original letter did not reflect the opinion of the editorial board. It contained strong nationalist sentiment and factual errors, and the word and theme of “constitutionalism” disappeared. Journalists and other staff working for *Southern Weekend* were outraged and went to Weibo. They believed that the propaganda department of the Guangdong provincial Party committee was responsible. On the evening of that incident, the editorial board of *Southern Weekend* published an open letter on Weibo, in which it listed the changes that had been made in the whole issue, including the New Year's letter. Three days later, it published another open letter expressing a strong determination to fight against censorship and to further investigate the incident.

The incident that happened three days ago is just a trigger of our anger.

According to our statistics, in *Southern Weekend*, 1,034 stories were forced to change or to be canceled in the year of 2012... We're not afraid of offending the officials, because we feel it is so important for journalism. We take action not because of anger, but out of the dignity, responsibility and honor of human

⁴⁹ The text of Dai Zhiyong's article is taken from Weibo posts.

beings. We take action on the basis of our desire for justice, conscience and love. (January 6, 2013)

As a weekly newspaper famous for its critical views of current affairs and the political system in China, *Southern Weekend* has been under strict scrutiny by the propaganda departments of the Guangdong Province (where the paper is registered) and the Communist Party central. No media were allowed to report the incident, and Weibo posts showing support for *Southern Weekend* were quickly deleted.

However, the strict control did not stop journalists and other Weibo users from talking about the incident and mobilizing further collective actions. Weibo was still the primary venue in which the *Southern Weekend* staff expressed its anger toward the propaganda officials, who were believed to have secretly changed the content of the New Year's Letter.

A wide range of Weibo users posted to support the *Southern Weekend* staff, including journalists in other media institutions, former *Southern Weekend* staff, media institutions, writers, lawyers, college students, celebrities, and ordinary citizens. Although posts containing any of the four Chinese characters “Nan Fang Zhou Mo”—the four characters of the Chinese name of the newspaper—were deleted quickly or became unsearchable, they continued posting.⁵⁰ Then the collective resistance on Weibo expanded to the streets. In the week that followed, a large number of protesters went to the Guangzhou office

⁵⁰ Sina has a system of filtering key words that might generate critique of the Party-state system. The Southern Weekend incident was viewed as having such potential. Therefore, everything that contained “Southern Weekend” in its Chinese name was deleted. However, this time the censorship went further to block the four characters from Weibo's search function and monitor every post that contained one of the four characters.

building of the Southern Media Group,⁵¹ and the incident began to receive global media coverage.

Although censorship happens in China every day, the *Southern Weekend* incident is still an extreme case. It occurred after the newspaper was ready for print, and the staff believed that it was a direct intervention from propaganda officials who were targeting an article in one particular newspaper. It threatened the ideals of journalistic freedom and of constitutionalism, as the article being replaced promoted constitutionalism in China. This incident was therefore an offense against journalistic freedom as well as against further reform in China.

The *Southern Weekend* incident thus encapsulates the key issues that have foregrounded this dissertation – the transformation of journalism in the age of social media, and the role of collective memory in journalism as key to activism contesting state power. It is worth considering these issues vis-a-vis the three tensions that have been central to this study. They come together in the incident in ways that say much about the intersection of journalism, collective memory and online activism, and their impact on China's search for modernity.

5.1 New models of journalism, collective memory and online activism

This study has shown that the three sets of tensions that are prevalent on Weibo lead to new models of understanding journalism, collective memory and online activism in the global flow of information. Each of the tensions suggested a different way to contest the

⁵¹ *Southern Weekend* is affiliated with Southern Media Group, a media company composed of both Party newspapers and more commercialized newspapers and other media products.

current Party-state system and the social issues associated with it. These tensions took on a particular character when considered in conjunction with the *Southern Weekend* incident, and it is worth considering them each in turn.

Control/resistance

This dissertation has shown the possibility for a new model of journalism that combines professional and personal practices, integrating traditional media institutions and social media platforms. Significantly, the two platforms for journalism have been shown to be indispensable to each other. Though it is categorized as social media, Weibo is recognized as a news platform by both the state and the public and has thus established itself as an important component of journalism in contemporary China. It not only invites journalistic practices but also participates in making news, thereby shifting the hierarchy of authority in news production.

In this study, we have seen that social media are no longer an extension of traditional media in news production, in which journalists and media institutions use social media sites to post their stories. Instead, social media have become an integral part of journalism. Internet companies such as Sina are actively participating in journalism, and have to play double roles—as the state-controlled news media and an alternative news provider—to address the often-contradictory needs of political safety and market success. While the Internet portals are not allowed to have their own journalists, they can collaborate with journalists, media institutions and non-journalists to promote certain news events and integrate information as an event is taking shape.

We have also seen that the news function of social media platforms makes censorship a complicated project. To recap, news media in China are subject to “local jurisdiction,” which means that all media registered in a local government have to be controlled by the local Party and state bureaus of organizations in charge of media in the central government. Therefore, criticizing the local government where the company is registered is not allowed, but local jurisdiction gives the Internet portals relative freedom to make decisions about how to implement the prohibition of the state. From executives to ordinary employees, Internet companies thus have to be aware of the unpredictable and flexible bottom line of censorship. As a media organization registered in Beijing, Sina has relative freedom to decide whether to delete a topic on Weibo, as long as the event does not involve the interests of the local government of Beijing and the central government.

The *Southern Weekend* incident adheres to these patterns. This case is very special, though, as it involved not only local interests but also sensitive topics for the entire Party-state system. Because *Southern Weekend* is registered in Guangdong Province, it is subject to the control of the Guangdong provincial bureau of the “big three,” and the protests online and offline initiated by the *Southern Weekend* staff also targeted the propaganda department of the Guangdong provincial Party committee. This means that the incident did not violate the interests of the Beijing local government, and Sina did not have to maintain strict control of the discussion of this topic on Weibo. But because constitutionalism and political reform are sensitive topics in contemporary Chinese politics, the case invited careful scrutiny and put pressure on Sina to control the information flow on Weibo.

This complex situation put Sina in a dilemma, and it is reflected in the activities of the “little secretaries” of Weibo, a team in charge of deleting “inappropriate” posts and suspending Weibo user IDs. In the beginning of the incident, many Weibo users complained that their posts about *Southern Weekend* were deleted very quickly. Later, Sina staff began to post on Weibo and implicitly express support for the *Southern Weekend* staff. Journalists also showed their understanding of Sina staff being caught in the middle, for they had to obey the state prohibition and also meet the expectations of Weibo users.

Three days ago, we experienced such humiliation. I posted seven times on Weibo, and all of my posts were deleted immediately. Then my ID was banned. Now I can speak, but I am still angry. I don't blame Sina. I know it is not carried out by 'little secretaries.' (@yuguotianxin, January 12, 2013)

Meanwhile, Sina had to consider the interests of its users, including large numbers of journalists. Because Weibo had been able to maintain its relative freedom as an alternative news platform and Sina has been a professional online news provider since its initial stages, Weibo had profited from this reputation and the reliability it suggested. Deleting posts and suspending Weibo user IDs irritated users and therefore harmed its market interest.

This study has also shown that Weibo attempts to maximize its profitability in the market as an alternative news platform, even while following state-maintained regulations. Weibo's image as an alternative news platform with partial journalistic autonomy is key to attracting users interested in news and current affairs. Sina staff, particularly the

operations team of Weibo, collaborated with journalists and on-site individuals to promote certain developing news and relevant topics in order to attract more users. In this process, Weibo strategically provides information that is not always available on traditional media platforms, seeking opportunities to include information that might not be favored by the state.

The *Southern Weekend* incident upheld this image of Weibo. As the conflict between journalists and propaganda officials escalated, the editorial board of *Southern Weekend* was forced to turn in the newspaper's Weibo account to the high-level pro-official administrators of the newspaper, who could stop the account from posting more about the incident. This prompted the *Southern Weekend* staff to call the activity "account robbery" on Weibo, a term which soon spread widely. After this happened, there was a significant relaxation of control of the topic related to *Southern Weekend* on Weibo, maintained by Sina staff, who started to show support of *Southern Weekend*. For example, a Weibo security account (@weidun) posted after the "robbery" of *Southern Weekend's* Weibo account:

In general, please do not give your account to others. It is very unsafe. This is the end of the year (Chinese lunar calendar); please be careful of your safety, especially our friends in the south (@Weidun, January 6, 2013).

"Our friends in the south" refers to the *Southern Weekend* staff. This post was later characterized by journalists as an implicit expression of Sina's supportive attitude toward *Southern Weekend*. Other Weibo accounts of Sina administrative teams also expressed their support for the journalists.

Another pattern supported by this dissertation is that journalists display both professional and personal identities on Weibo. On the one hand, their professional identity in traditional media institutions gives them authority to speak on Weibo, while ordinary citizens (non-journalists) who post firsthand reports on-site often connect to journalists in order to reach a wider audience. This connection produces a patterned reaction to news events, as the information relay from non-journalists to journalists speeds up as one event follows another. This speed makes it possible to circumvent censorship, as the on-site report could reach the public before the prohibition from the state was issued. The journalist–non-journalist connection therefore challenges the authorities usually operating in traditional media. On the other hand, when an issued prohibition reaches all media institutions, the normal coverage stops. Then, journalists often speak on behalf of themselves, reporting the latest development from a personal perspective to resist state control. The double identities of journalists thus extend the journalistic community to a wide range of participants, making the voice of journalists powerful on Weibo, and eventually pressuring traditional media channels and the government to follow up and the local government to respond. As *Southern Weekend* incident shows, although there had been attempts to transform Weibo into an entertainment and social networking-based platform by Sina, Weibo’s role as a news platform is not easy to be eliminated.

The *Southern Weekend* incident illustrated the double identities of journalists. In this case, more specifically, journalists themselves were at the center of struggle. Their professional identity and dignity were threatened, as they often used the word “rape” to describe what they had suffered in this incident. The incident not only violated the interests of journalists in one institution, but it also threatened the whole journalistic

community. In turn, this strengthened the sense of cohesion in that community and gave the protest broader meaning. Because no official media were allowed to report the incident, journalists used Weibo as the primary venue for sharing personal opinions and experiences.

On Weibo, the *Southern Weekend* journalists and other staff showed their pride in being part of the newspaper. The *Southern Weekend* staff initiated petition letters and received signatures from former staff and interns as well as current staff. The number of signatures increased when the petition letters were reposted on Weibo. At the same time, users who participated in offline protests in front of the newspaper's office building in Guangzhou also uploaded pictures to Weibo to show support. The *Southern Weekend* staff, standing on the front lines of the incident, posted detailed insider information, mainly about how the New Year's Letter had been replaced and how the *Southern Weekend* official Weibo account had been taken over by higher-level administrators of the newspaper who wanted to post pro-official messages. The firsthand insider stories reached a wider public in this way.

In sum, this study has shown how the roles played by Sina and journalists in the platform of Weibo lead to a new kind of journalism in the age of social media. They break the boundary between institutional and personal modes of journalism, challenge the authority of traditional media and the state, and collaborate to compete with official discourse. As with other patterns established in this study, the *Southern Weekend* incident illustrates the complexity of control and resistance in social media, reflected in the double identities of both Internet companies and journalists. This incident directly involved journalism, so

journalists were not only reporting a large-scale public incident but also struggling for their own rights. At the same time, the nature of the newspaper (its liberal-leaning view), its registration in a local government other than Beijing, and the theme of constitutionalism all led to fluctuations in the ensuing level of control. All of this suggests that control and resistance in social media need to be understood in the broader context of the hybrid Chinese media system. That context involves the unpredictability of censorship, the flexibility of journalist identity and the melting boundary of journalistic practices.

Past/present

The features of social media analyzed in this study have extended what is known about collective memory and how the past can be used in journalistic practices to contest the present. Significantly, collective memory in social media is transient, with individual authorship and fragmented narratives that serve a purpose in organizing collective pondering over crises. In this study, I categorized past events as either “remote past” or “instantaneous past.”

For the remote past, this study has shown that Weibo provided a space for rewriting history, and journalists took the lead in it. Moreover, details provided by individual citizens, either through investigation or personal experience, challenged the official version of history based on the Communist Party’s interpretation. On Weibo, journalists were also shown to invoke historical events as critiques of the present, the connection with the past making the critique possible and powerful.

For the instantaneous past, this study has demonstrated that with the accelerating pace of information updates, the boundary between the past and present is porous and largely indiscernible, with a rapid transition from the news to memory on a daily basis. First, journalists become the leading voice in online commemorations that happen while the news is unfolding. Such commemorations usually focus on those who lost their lives in accidents or disasters and did not get sufficient media coverage or proper compensation. Journalists also commonly initiate the discussion of anniversaries of major news events that are not favored by the state and thus less covered by the media. Second, past events with shared features bolster one another, adding to the newsworthiness of the developing news. The cumulative effect of the past thus makes a present event into a marker of a broader issue, producing a more powerful critique of the present. Finally, journalists are typically highly conscious of their responsibility to future generations. They believe that they are writing the first draft of history and make every effort to protect the materials they upload to Weibo as evidence, asking their followers to circulate them so that they can reach the widest range of recipients before they are deleted. This dissertation has demonstrated that the past in journalism provides cultural resources that help to contest official discourse and to prevail in the race against censorship.

These patterns were upheld in the *Southern Weekend* incident, where the “remote past” was the history of the Communist Party (CCP). Weibo users posted quotes from the speeches of CCP leaders and editorials from the CCP-run newspapers of the 1940s, which reflected the actions of the Communist Party at a time in which it was fighting the corrupt dictatorship of the Nationalist Party (KMT) and struggling for press freedom. Here are two examples:

There are two kinds of newspapers. One speaks for the people, telling people the truth, informing people about democracy, and enlightening people. The other speaks for dictators. They tell people rumor, blocking people's minds, and fooling people (@tanrenwei,⁵² January 7, 2013).

No news is allowed to be reported. No opinions are allowed to be expressed. Every day we follow the Party [Nationalist] line...As a result, people have the impression that 'newspapers are not reliable.' It's been eight years. It has ruined the reputation of Chinese journalism. We're ashamed of having accepted such a system silently (@Lens, January 8, 2013).

The first quote was a reprint of an editorial in the Communist *People's Daily* that had first appeared on January 11, 1946, criticizing media censorship of the Nationalist Party regime. The second post by @Lens Magazine quoted an editorial from September 1, 1945, that had appeared in *Xinhua Daily*, another CCP-run newspaper. These two reprints of editorials in CCP-run newspapers from the 1940s show that recycling historical materials is a common mnemonic practice, which in this case conveys an implicit critique of the Communist Party itself. The party that long fought against censorship under the Nationalist Party regime can now be doing what it used to oppose.

The "instantaneous past" in this incident was the shared memory of the *Southern Weekend*. Here, readers and journalists shared their personal stories of the newspaper on Weibo. Past issues of *Southern Weekend* from throughout its 29-year history were cited, and famous quotes from earlier New Year's Letters were posted. Past incidents were

⁵² Former journalist of the Southern Media Group

mentioned in which the newspaper had been punished by the state for crossing the bottom line of censorship. *Southern Weekend* in this way became a symbol of the conscience of Chinese journalists, for its critical view of the current political system and the courage of its journalists to preserve history, challenge the bottom line of censorship, and struggle for journalistic freedom.

User @hegang posted, “It’s been 29 years. Every Thursday from February 11, 1984 to January 3, 2013, 289 Mid-Guangzhou Avenue,” together with the slogan of *Southern Weekend*, “from here, we understand China” and many candle icons. The two dates indicated “birth” and “death,” which referred to the launch of the weekly newspaper and the recent incident. The style and content of this post resembled a memorial. For this user, the *Southern Weekend* incident was the death of a 29-year-old newspaper.

Sharing memories of *Southern Weekend* highlighted the “spirit” of the newspaper.

Viewed as the model of journalism to which people aspire, the newspaper was recognized as a platform on which journalists could realize their dream. For instance, user @fuwengxiaoye shared his experience of becoming a journalist and of how *Southern Weekend* had inspired him:

This is a *Southern Weekend* newspaper I saved, published February 22, 2001. At that time I was an engineering student but I became a journalist under the influence of *Southern Weekend* and *China Youth Daily*. My dream of being a journalist had powerful impact on me. I use this picture to support *Southern Weekend* colleagues. (@fuwengxiaoye, January 5, 2013)

This post belonged to a hashtag “show your old *Southern Weekend*,” a hot topic on Weibo during the incident. Sharing past issues of the newspaper and the stories behind them thus strengthened the sense of community among readers and journalists, all of whom were connected through the newspaper.

Journalists and other users also shared news events in which *Southern Weekend* had struggled with propaganda officials to get its stories published. Listing past incidents when *Southern Weekend* had been forced to cancel its pages and stories put the present incident in the broader context of the long tradition of harsh media control.

This incident also produced its own “first draft of history” that needs to be preserved. *Southern Weekend* staff shared documents that described how the New Year’s Letter had been replaced, and how the editorial board had been forced to turn in the Weibo account of the newspaper. Followers were asked to save the document and retweet it immediately, so that the evidence could be preserved for later investigation. In addition to the incident, journalists are also sharing their experience of writing the first draft of history in the face of pending censorship while working at *Southern Weekend*.

Former *Southern Weekend* journalist @Mlingshan recalled how her colleagues had managed to publish the story of the high-speed railway accident (July 23, 2011) despite an issued prohibition, the story of the release of the oppositional leader Ang San Suu Kyi in Myanmar, and a story about the Great Chinese Famine on the front page, all of which were listed as sensitive topics by the propaganda department. She continued, “My supervisor said, ‘this is the history we have to face, no matter what price I have to pay.’ This is the spirit of *Southern Weekend*. ” (January 5, 2013) By recalling *Southern*

Weekend's involvement in major news events, this post showed the continuity of the “spirit” of the newspaper, and journalists’ sense of historical responsibility.

The *Southern Weekend* incident also illustrated how the two kinds of past can be used in one specific event to contest the present. Various sources shared on Weibo—reprinted historical materials, online commemoration, and citations of similar incidents in the past—made all materials and stories from the past into powerful tools for critique. These mnemonic practices showed the newspaper prevailing over challenges in its past and present and reinforced a collective identity centering on the personal experiences and memories of this newspaper. The past thus became more visible in social media platforms, providing significant symbolic resources to contest state power.

Global/local

This dissertation has demonstrated that Weibo provides a new Chinese national identity through global news flow, and that collective memory is key to the construction of Chineseness. Chineseness has three components – connection, comparison, and compassion – and its meaning challenges both the official and popular versions of nationalism.

We have seen how transnational Chinese platforms—Weibo users with high levels of trans-border mobility — strengthen the connection between domestic and overseas Chinese, providing diverse perspectives based on their unique experiences and sources. These individuals accommodate information that is blocked by the Great Firewall, further facilitating the free flow of information.

We have also seen how Weibo localizes events with global visibility and gives local news global meaning through a comparison with multiple “others,” envisioning an ideal image of China as a civilized nation.

These multiple others include Western countries exhibiting advanced democracies, neighboring countries that have established democracy, transitional societies moving toward democracy, and countries that remain authoritarian. Past events with global visibility are thus often compared with the present local event. Past local events in China are also compared with ongoing events with global visibility. Multiple others form an ideal for China that is based on “universal values,” a set of ideas originating from Western liberal-democratic society that is viewed as the standard of a civilized nation.

This transnational mobility of people and the increasing global-local information exchange has led to the recognition of global membership as the basis of the new Chinese identity. Global membership requires compassion for other nations and people, developed from the collective rejection of a narrow-minded nationalism that had long shaped reactions to news events in conjunction with the indoctrination of “patriotic” education. Global membership was thus shown to challenge both officially promoted nationalism and popular versions of nationalism in mediated forms.

In the *Southern Weekend* incident, the global-local connection was evident in full force. What is particular about this incident is that it was directly implicated in the modernity debate in China, because of the constitutionalism theme of the New Year’s Letter. This debate had not been made explicit until this incident.

Overseas Chinese Weibo users participated intensely in online protest, especially journalists showing support for their peers in China. For example, writer @qiuzhaofeng in Japan posted, “I’m now watching it on Weibo, cheering up Chinese journalists from abroad.” (January 5, 2013) The escalating scale of this protest also attracted the coverage of leading Western media with a global reach (*Washington Post*, Reuters, BBC, etc.), and their links were shared on Weibo. Regional media coverage was also picked up by Weibo users, where images of newspapers in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and Japan all showed coverage of the incident.

Meanwhile, Weibo posts also cited stories that showed that even authoritarian states could change and achieve press freedom, democracy and constitutionalism, as long as people work together to fight the existing system. Burma was a prime example. On December 31, 2012, the official Weibo account of *Southern People Weekly*, a magazine affiliated with the *Southern Press Group*, posted a story about Myanmar’s last censorship official and quoted his reflections: “My work in the past was incompatible with the reality of the world. We can’t refuse to change. The whole country needs change. I’m so proud of myself for putting censorship to an end.” The story had been first posted several days before the *Southern Weekend* incident, but during the incident it appeared again, reposted by the same ID on January 5, 2013, to show a strong contrast with China.

In this incident, social change in Burma was widely cited. An incident as such not only violated the interests of journalists and threatened freedom of expression but was also viewed by journalists and their supporters as an obstacle to China’s democratization. Posts and reposts argued that democratization and constitutionalism were neither

incompatible with Chinese society nor a threat to the current social order. Just as Burma had successfully ended authoritarianism, so could China.

When Burma is on the way to democratization, the nation and the party did not die. After it lifted the ban on political parties and press, there were no riots in society. On the contrary, it was accepted by the global society and trusted by its people. So if China conducts political reform, the result would be positive.

(@Lingafeng, January 8, 2013)

In response to this post, another user (@pangguanzhemayong) argued, “the change in Burma is a valuable experience as an exemplar for our leaders in China. Democratization and constitutionalism are no longer the enemy of the state.” (January 8, 2013) A former photojournalist (@lizhensheng) echoed this, as he reposted, “Democratization does not lead to the death of the nation and the party. Lifting the ban on political parties and the press does not lead to riots in society.” (January 8, 2013)

The censored 2013 New Year’s Letter, “Chinese Dream, a Dream of Constitutionalism,” provided a vision of constitutionalism and democracy for China. According to journalists and their supporters who participated in the protest, constitutionalism and democracy were understood as marks of modernity, components of “universal values” and the ultimate goal that China should reach. The new meaning of Chineseness illustrated in the *Southern Weekend* incident thus challenged the official version of China’s future that assumes the unique route China should take.

But, unlike earlier incidents involving tensions between local and global impulses, in this incident the conflict between two forces was more visible than before, and it raised

questions about what was really at stake. After protesters went to the office building of the Southern Media Group following several days of online protests, participants reported a confrontation between two camps – the *Southern Weekend* supporters and the pro-official group, as one of the participants reported,

There is a debate now. An old man said ‘we’re a socialist country, and you can’t oppose socialism.’ He was criticizing the *Southern Weekend* supporters. Another group disputed, ‘even socialism has constitutionalism’...there was a big applause after that (@yaxiaohan, January 6, 2013).

For the pro-official group, criticizing the government meant betraying the nation. On the other hand, the *Southern Weekend* supporters believed that criticizing the government was the responsibility of journalists and media. They opposed the pro-official group’s hostile attitude toward the West. In response, one writer, @tujiayefu, commented on Weibo, “the government attributes everything [collective actions...] to ‘Western hostile forces’ to threaten the public. This is an outdated mentality of the Cold War. It has been misleading the public for years.” (January 8, 2013) This response to the official’s statement identified the involvement of “Western hostile forces” in the *Southern Weekend* incident, which is one of the most common terms typically used in the official discourse as the saboteur of China’s national revival.

In addition to the offline protests and the face-to-face debate, the Chinese government also started manipulating the media to enhance the conflict between two camps. Although previously the debate over two possibilities of modernity had existed on Weibo, it is at

this moment that the subtler debate became more polarizing and explicit among Weibo users. This made the *Southern Weekend* incident into a critical moment, through which the debate took on a visibility that was both nationwide and highly evident.

On January 8, 2013, all Chinese newspapers were requested by the propaganda department to reprint an editorial of *Global Times* that had criticized the incident, in conjunction with the hope that doing so would help lessen public support for *Southern Weekend*. Among liberal-leaning users, *Global Times* was notorious for its pro-official and nationalist reports and editorials. After the *Global Times* editorial came out, numerous posts targeted its editor-in-chief (@huxijin), as an “evil” inciting a “countercurrent” (@tujiayefu), and “violent” (@heyanguang). Later, the overseas edition of *People’s Daily* published an editorial titled “Chinese model is breaking the hegemony of universal values,” which was posted on Weibo (@Sina commentary):

Since the modern time, universal values have constrained the world. The Western civilization has suffocated diversity [of possibilities of modernization]. Now people with insight in Europe are hoping that China can develop an alternative choice other than the route of the West. In other words, the world needs the Chinese dream (@Sina commentary, reprinted from *People’s Daily overseas edition*, January 10, 2013).

This editorial received a huge wave of backlash on Weibo. Coming out in the middle of the *Southern Weekend* incident, it was seen to echo the central Party and reflect official attitudes. As the editorial noted, ideas associated with “universal values” were viewed as only applicable to the West, which was not suited to China’s condition. It provided

another version of “Chinese dream,” which is the officially approved version—a strong nation needed by the world. Contrary to this, the New Year’s Letter of *Southern Weekend* provides a “Chinese dream,” in which constitutionalism is the most important component. Constitutionalism is associated with “universal values,” which is the target of criticism of the Party-led media.

While the *Southern Weekend* incident upheld this study’s discussion of the global-local relationship on Weibo, unlike earlier incidents, the controversy over the New Year’s Letter led to a debate that was even broader: It displayed the emergence of larger brewing tensions concerning the value of constitutionalism, and the ensuing debate over “Chinese characteristics” or “universal values” as the route to the future, which made the *Southern Weekend* incident a center of discussions. In other words, Weibo emerged here as not only central to the global flow of information but a key platform for airing widely scoped tensions about modernity in China. Therefore, the incident needs to be understood as part of a broader picture concerning the global trends associated with social transition.

Though according to the supporters of *Southern Weekend*, and liberal-leaning Weibo users in general, terms like “democracy,” “freedom of expression” and “constitutionalism” are universal and not unique to Western society, in this incident another voice emerged in opposition to these views and gained certain level of popularity.

A new model of journalism in social contention

This discussion of *Southern Weekend* shows that the three tensions – control/resistance, past/present and global/local – work together. The three sets of tensions that prevail in social media platforms provide three dimensions through which it is possible to examine

journalism in contentious and transitional societies—institutional, temporal, and spatial—together with collective memory and online activism in a global context.

Institutionally, the integration of professional and personal journalistic practices challenges the longstanding hierarchy of authority in making news. Voices on the personal level, including individual journalists and ordinary citizens, become more powerful than institutional coverage during key news events. Professional journalists are now building up personal networks in social media through personal connections in these platforms, which significantly decentralizes their practices from media institutions, and to a large extent circumvents the institutional center. As social media service providers, Internet corporations are active agents in news production and can mobilize media, journalists, and non-journalists to contribute to news making on their platforms, providing sources for further journalistic engagement in public events. In this way, journalists and non-journalists are mobilized to express their opinions and protest censorship collectively, participating more widely in online activism with a less insecure level of freedom.

Temporally, social media become flattened spaces where events from different time periods are displayed at the same time. The boundary between news and memory is no longer clear, and the past becomes a powerful tool for the criticism of the present. With the blending of news and opinion, drama and fact, events are perceived as unfolding at a faster pace than what was really happening on the ground (Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira, 2012). The compressed distance between past and present is shown in the density and speed of updates of developing news, which happen while the stories are

curated, racing against increasingly sophisticated state censorship and contesting the state's attempts to separate the present from its broader social implications by eliminating the connection with the past. Various mnemonic practices in conjunction with journalism thus become tools for online activism.

Spatially, in a global context, journalism needs to be understood in the transnational mobility of people and flow of information. Journalism in social media is now drawing on global resources that are brought to bear in real time. Through social media platforms, the transnational flows of information traverse the constraints set by authoritarian government and institutional journalism and build up new meanings of collective identity.

5.2 Weibo and modernity in China

Journalism is central to modernity. Chinese journalism is derived from China's encounter with Western power and the importation of Western modernity, which resulted in different waves of social movements, reforms, and revolutions that aimed to save China by turning it into a Westernized nation. This study shows that journalism is more than a profession in a society like China, and that social media have opened up more possibilities for journalism to mobilize diverse opinions and sources of resistance in the face of strong state power and growing conflicts.

I have used the *Southern Weekend* incident to conclude my study not only because it happened during the closing stage of my research and illustrated how the three tensions work together, but also because it happened in a specific moment that heightens the implications of my study. The *Southern Weekend* incident can be understood as a turning

point of Weibo, from a news platform to a space that invites citizen participation of politics, on the basis of the debate over modernity in China.

The incident occurred in the middle of China's power transition (after the 18th CCP congregation and before the annual national congress meeting) – a point about which the Chinese people, no matter one's political view, had expectations for this new generation of top leaders and shared concern of China's future. Most of the people I studied— liberal-leaning journalists— expected a political reform to be carried out by China's new generation of leaders.

The new generation of leaders envisioned a “Chinese Dream.” It is “the great revival of the Chinese nation.”⁵³ This is a claim full of nationalist sentiments, aimed at building a stronger nation in the world. The “Chinese dream” emphasizes Chinese characteristics on the way to modernity. However, the liberal-leaning Weibo users appropriated new meanings for the “Chinese Dream.” According to them, the dream is based on the ideas associated with modernity that have been continuously imported to and adapted by China for one and a half century. In particular, this view emphasizes the liberal-democratic-based idea of “universal values,” urging the Chinese state to further reform political systems in order to realize universal values, an indication of a truly modern and civilized nation.

The conflict between the two versions of the “Chinese Dream” was illustrated in the *Southern Weekend* incident. Although there were similar debates before, it was one of the very beginning moments since Weibo evolved that this conflict became so visible. The

⁵³ Xi Jinping's Vision: Chasing the Dream, *The Economist*, May 4, 2013

Southern Weekend's New Year's Letter of 2013 was a response to the new leader's vision of a "Chinese Dream," but the editorial board inserted its understanding of that dream as constitutionalism. However, the incident dampened many people's enthusiasm about China's further political reform. The protest that followed the incident indicated such disillusionment and the desire for change.

Generally speaking, the *Southern Weekend* incident reflects this larger debate, now surfacing in China, about the two visions of the nation's future. These two visions have generated two different kinds of discourses on Weibo. One is the pro-official/nationalist discourse that emphasizes the legitimacy of the Communist Party regime and supports the government. It sometimes even resembles or calls for the revival of Mao-style politics. This pro-official discourse has found its way onto Weibo during its four years of existence, mainly through the Weibo accounts of Party-led media (such as *Global Times*), governmental and military official users (both individuals and organizations), and the supporters of Mao-style politics. However, the liberalizing discourse has been far more central and significant over Weibo's short life. This liberalizing discourse advocates democratization and constitutionalism, calling for thorough political reform. This perspective and vision are shared by the liberal-leaning users. Consequently, Weibo is a contentious space; however, it has amplified the voices of the latter, which have not generally been present on traditional media platforms.

Weibo is an important vehicle for the search for modernity in the context of contemporary social transition in China. Through an engagement in journalism, it reflects the main conflicts and debates of social transition in China. Although the four-year-old

Weibo cannot capture the entire process of social transition in China, it serves as a platform for the voices of social and political change, which is much more amplified today than it was during the pre-social media era. The discussions on Weibo strengthen the desire for social change, presenting a situation that urges for immediate and fundamental political reform.

As Tom, a Sina employee whose work involves daily Weibo operations, especially news processing, noted:

For me, Weibo is ventilation that helps to channel intensive social conflicts accumulated during the past three decades or even during the past 150 years in China. Weibo is so important because these social conflicts could not find such an effective way out before there was Weibo (personal communication, July 25, 2012).

By placing Weibo in this critical juncture in the social life of contemporary China, he values Weibo as a place that displays in a condensed fashion the problems associated with China's social transition. This rapid social change and the influx of Western ideas have thereby complicated the route to modernity in China.

Significantly, the interactions on Weibo as a news platform reflect the social conflicts of a transitional society, and they provide a vehicle for different social groups to search for an ideal route to modernity for China. Though the meaning of Chinese modernity has varied, it has always contained Western elements. The search for Chinese modernity is situated in China's paradoxical relationship with the West and the ideas associated with the development of capitalism and "modern" society more broadly. Scholars have

criticized the universalization of the Eurocentric view of modernity (e.g., Featherstone, Lash & Robertson, 1995) and have claimed modernity's particularity in different societies, which has significantly undermined the universalization of Eurocentric modernity (Dirlik, 2002). Problematizing the universalization of Eurocentric modernity can be incompatible with specific cultural contexts.

As should be clear by now, the conflict between two positions regarding Chinese modernity—the emphasis on either “Chinese characteristics” or “universal values” as its most important components—escalated since the beginning of 2013. This was because, as the *Southern Weekend* incident shows, constitutionalism—an idea that liberal-leaning journalists and other groups (especially lawyers and scholars) had long believed to be China's way out of its contemporary impasse—turned out to be not favored by the new generation of leaders. Later, Weibo users posted articles that had been published in official CCP magazines in strong opposition to constitutionalism and democracy, and both media and personal accounts posted the news and their responses.

A scholar from Fudan University penned an article in *Guangming Daily*, arguing that Western democracy has always been used as a reference point and benchmark, which is highly misleading for the building of political systems in developing countries. The imported ‘democracy’ becomes an epitaph. To have real spirit of freedom and national dignity, it is necessary to downgrade the democracy promoted by a few Western countries as universal knowledge to local knowledge (@Headline news, May 29, 2013).

This same newspaper also published articles criticizing “Westernized thoughts” in ruling the nation (June 1, 2013).

The Communist Party’s news website (cpcnews.cn) published an article titled ‘Understanding the Nature of Constitutionalism’—the word ‘constitutionalism’ only refers to the implementation of bourgeois constitutions. The advocacy of constitutionalism is clearly an attempt to overthrow the rule of the Communist Party (@nanfangrenwu, June 16, 2013).

Responses to these articles on Weibo indicate that these articles serve as the mouthpiece of the highest-level officials in China, who consider constitutionalism as particular to Western society and not applicable to the reality of China. In addition to their anti-constitutionalism stance, these articles criticize the idea of “universal values,” arguing that these values and the ideas associated with them are specific to Western society and do not apply to China. Such attempts by the new leaders of the Communist Party to localize concepts such as “universal values,” “constitutionalism” and “democracy” coincide with scholarship that provincializes Eurocentric modernity. The emphasis on the unique Chinese experience of modernity to a large extent echoes the Chinese government’s project of modernity, which understands constitutionalism and democracy as local phenomena that have specific connections to modern Western history and can only be used in limited applications to China.

Still praised by a large number of Weibo users, the liberal-democratic-based “universal values” that typifies the history of Western societies are still frequently cited on Weibo to contest contemporary authoritarian state power. Therefore, the scholarly critique of the

universalization of Eurocentric modernity cannot be fully adopted in the Chinese context without an appreciation of how such ideas that are being used to resist official discourses, which emphasize “Chinese characteristics,” coincidentally echo the localization of Western modernity.

What is the implication of the importation of modernity to the intersection of journalism, collective memory and online activism in the age of social media? Chinese journalism is a product of modernity. Journalism in China has developed alongside every step of its social transition. It plays a key role in pushing the boundary of the free flow of information, particularly as it extends to social media platforms to mobilize citizen participation. Journalism and its reliance on collective memory thus need to be understood via this complex relationship with the West. China has not had a stable society since the mid-19th century, when it was forced to open itself to Western powers. This encounter brought in Western ideas, resulting in different waves of social movements, reforms and revolutions that aimed at saving China, and transforming it into a modern nation. Therefore, in the beginning, Chinese modernity was modeled on the West, aiming for the establishment of a nation that could be considered “modern.”

On Weibo, the modern history of China has become a popular resource that is widely cited, discussed and debated as part of China’s collective memory. The invoking of the past 150 years, a time period that paralleled the greatest social change in China, is a process that enables China to search for a path to modernity. This dissertation has demonstrated that an array of time periods and events—remarkable moments in modern Chinese history—are frequently mentioned and discussed, especially at the arrival of key

news events that invite the discussion of past events with similar features. Different time periods and historical events are referenced in the different visions of Chinese modernity that are plied by various social groups and political forces, most being related to national independence and sociopolitical structure. Such accommodations suggest how much of Chinese history remains under revision in the age of social media, mainly through online citizen participation. Because news events revive the past when they resemble similar historical moments, the past is thereby used as a critique of the present.

As a micro-blogging service that has become a news platform, its users are actively engaged in ongoing news events, reporting stories and pinpointing underlying issues, all of which lead to the debate of modernity. The extensive debates on the route that China should take to modernity produce different understandings of modern nationhood in the contemporary Chinese context, and accordingly, citizenship.

Social media platforms, such as Weibo, have connected their users through the shared experience and memory of news events. Although not all users can be present on the site of a developing news story, through the sharing of instantaneous updates, the observation of the latest developments and the archiving of the details of a story, users can participate in every step of a story and conduct further questioning of the Party-state system. The collaboration among users in social media space then paves the way for raising the awareness of key issues related to citizenship, such as consciousness of human rights and the power of citizen participation. Connectivity on Weibo not only produces powerful witnesses that officials in charge cannot reject by simple denials, but it also puts officials under public scrutiny, agitating for changes in certain aspects of social life and the

political system through collective action. For example, in the case of the death sentence of the street vendor Xia Junfeng mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, the posts on Weibo not only revealed the whole story to a larger public, but also relayed the desire to enhance the transparency and justice of the Chinese legal system. The *Southern Weekend* incident opened up opportunities for citizens to recognize the importance of the freedom of expression, and how constitutionalism is relevant to everyday life, consequently mobilizing further participation in and support for the protest. Some of the journalists, through their active participation in sharing news stories and opinions on Weibo, have become activists that initiated charity campaigns to help the marginal social groups, criticizing the lack of the responsibility of the state.⁵⁴ Weibo has also become a platform where corrupted officials were exposed to the public, as they display inappropriate behaviors or wealth, in which journalists are also participating, which caused several officials to resign.⁵⁵ During moments of crisis, such as earthquake and flooding, citizens also used Weibo to spread messages about safety and call for first aid, mobilizing mutual assistance.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ For example, a journalist Deng Fei started several charity campaigns, in collaboration with some charity groups in China (e.g. Social Welfare Foundation of China), such as providing free lunch meals to rural schools (@freelunch, <http://weibo.com/freelunch>). Wang Keqin initiated a campaign together with some charity organizations in China to provide financial support and care for pneumoconiosis (black lung) patients, usually migrant workers unprotected from chemicals that cause the disease (@daaiqingchen, <http://weibo.com/daaiqingchen>).

⁵⁵ For example, in September 2012, an official of the Safety Inspection Bureau of Shaanxi Province, Yang Dacai, was seen to smile at the site of a deadly traffic accident, and then was revealed to have 11 luxury-brand watches, incompatible with his normal income as a civil servant. He was forced to resign after such an exposure on Weibo. (See http://www.bbc.co.uk/zhongwen/simp/chinese_news/2012/09/120921_china_weibo_media.shtml).

⁵⁶ During the thunderstorm and flooding in Beijing, July 21, 2012, citizens in Beijing used Weibo to spread messages reporting the situation in their neighborhoods, offering help to people who were trapped on the way, mobilizing volunteers.... Weibo users @Zhaoch, @Yekuangzh, and @Dengfei posted and

Thus, many journalists and liberal-minded users consider social media such as Weibo as spaces of “enlightenment.” Through news events and the production of collective memories of these events, ideas imported from Western modernity, such as democracy and constitutionalism are being popularized in public discourse, which are understood as essential to modernity are considered “universal values” and are widely discussed on Weibo through news events. These ideas are considered by liberal-leaning, media-related users as marks of Chinese modernity. According to these users, these are the basic prerequisites for China to become “modern.”

While the main conflict between “Chinese characteristics” and “universal values” that evinces the debate over modernity is becoming increasingly visible on Weibo, modernity itself remains full of complexity and contradiction in the Chinese context. Both the “Chinese characteristics” and “universal values” aim at making China a modern nation, and they only differ in their choices of approach. While they take different opinions on the Western world, the West is their primary goal, a model that they both look to. The two sides of the modernity debate intersect with online activism, as citizens sometimes strategically employ pro-official frameworks to express their concern and critiques. This has been noted by Perry (2009) in her analysis of popular protests in China, viewed as a continuation of those in previous times, in which grievances and petitions were framed according to terms that could be approved by officials, in order to better negotiate with the authoritarian state (20).

reposted to praise the collaborative activities, “this is a new Beijing, which is filled with friendship, kindness, and love. Our citizens have reached a new level of civilization...” (July, 22, 2012)

The modernity debate that has been brought to the forefront in the public discourse via Weibo has its limits. Weibo users consist of only a small portion of the entire Chinese-speaking population across the globe. Journalists, in particular, are among the most educated people on Weibo, together with scholars and other opinion leaders.

Consequently, the modernity debate reflects views that are largely held by the most urban, elite, and educated portions of the populace. Moreover, within China, there is a mixture of modes of modernity, or at the very least a mixture of Chinese characteristics and universal values. For example, the uneven development found in rural and urban areas displays different stages of modernity experienced over the past two centuries in other nations, such as urbanization, industrialization, mass migration and the rapid evolution of information technologies. While the urban educated populace is calling for a fundamental political reform that incorporates constitutionalism and democracy, the most underprivileged groups in urban and rural areas struggle for their basic necessities and more equal opportunities in their lives. Their understandings of being modern are thus quite different, all compressed in a short time period.

5.3 Epilogue

This study spanned three years of the development of Weibo. It examined how social media have become the primary venue for the transformation of journalism, attaching it to practices associated with collective memory as a means of online activism in a transitional society. Weibo is positioned at a time of larger tensions between the state and the public. The four-year-old Weibo is a primary example of a broader set of social media in China, all of which reflect the main conflicts that characterize social transition, which

can take decades to resolve. Within this transitional moment, it is thus relevant to consider the two versions of modernity being debated, which reflects how different social groups are searching for the future of China in the newly emerging social media platforms, in which collective memories have played a significant part.

In looking at one particular social media platform that features journalism, this study has captured one moment, which showcases major social conflicts in a transitional society, including the call for more justice, the respect of individual rights and a thorough reform of the political system, on the one hand, and the legitimatization of the leadership of Communist Party, the emphasis of socialism with “Chinese characteristics” and a stronger nation in the world, on the other. Both sides point toward the meanings of a Chinese nation.

Social media, as shown in this study of Weibo, provide a cultural and technological platform that has adapted globally popular characteristics to local nuances. The latter are deeply rooted in the history and culture of the Chinese society, reflecting the complexities of historical and contemporary social contentions and China’s anxieties over embracing the global world. Social media’s presence displays and intensifies these longstanding social conflicts, through new modes of digital engagement.

The intersection described in this dissertation has singular contours. Social media have provided possibilities for the practices, populations and boundaries of journalism to be more flexible. This flexibility has made it convenient to mobilize the participants of journalism, as they work together to resist state control, as well as non-journalists at their side. The past and present are no longer discernably separate, making the past a powerful

critique of the present in various forms of mnemonic practice. The global connection mixes populations in ways not seen before and produces new meaning of national identity through the global/local exchange of news events and memories attached to them.

It is, however, too soon to know where the intersection analyzed here will lead. Already there are signs that the state apparatus is closing in on Weibo. Weibo has been popular for its active engagement in news, but it has threatened the authority of the official media. During Weibo's development, they often endorse the portrayal of Weibo as full of rumors and misleading information, and at the same time, they are active participants of Weibo. As shown in *Southern Weekend* as well as in many other incidents, the control of media in authoritarian states is a complicated process. It has not only the "hard" mode such as issues of prohibition and temporary shutting down of certain contents or functions, but also the "soft" strategies including posting newspaper editorials speaking for the government, as well as the participation of individual officials in the platform. These two approaches to media control have always existed alongside each other within the Communist Party's control mechanism. While these do exist, Weibo has nonetheless already played an important role in pushing the boundary of state power on journalistic freedom and social justice.

The competition between officialdom and ordinary citizens (including journalists) in the domination of public discourse is intensifying. Control of social media not only takes the form of censorship, but it is also reflected in the battle between officials and individuals who experience or witness news events, permeating interpretations of a wide series of

issues and concepts such as modernity. The conflict between officialdom and ordinary citizens shows a deepening gap that, as articulated by journalists and other liberal-minded users, reflects a reality in China without constitutionalism and other important components of modernity. In discussing these incidents, users cite similar incidents in the past, calling for further reform that incorporates these key issues, which they believe will lead to a modern nation.

With more and more news becoming hot topics and taking shape as collective memory on Weibo, the patterned response to topical events becomes increasingly significant. When an event takes place, witnesses and on-site journalists post updates instantaneously. Then Sina starts to integrate all relevant information, promoting a topic if perceived as appropriate. At the same time, Weibo users start to preserve the firsthand evidence of the event and mobilize collective remembering, citing past events with similar elements from global and local to contest the attempts of shutting the topic down. Traditional media then follow up. Finally, Weibo discussions become a locus for liberal-leaning users to advocate the version of Chinese modernity based on “universal values,” targeting the Party-led version of modernity that highlights “Chinese characteristics.” At present, activities such as these happen continuously, with almost no discernable distance between a news event, Weibo hot topic, collective memory, and its further significance.

This study problematizes the critique of universalization of Western modernity as a “universal value” itself. Localizing Western modernity brings about a potential of collusion with the “Chinese characteristics” as one option of Chinese modernity, which is an attempt to localize “universal values,” such as democracy and constitutionalism,

legitimizing the Communist Party's version of Chinese modernity without these ideas. In contemporary China, the notions derived from Western modernity are still symbolic sources that are used to contest Party-state power in various forms of online activism.

Weibo has its own limitations. As my interviews with Sina employees show, while Weibo got its popularity as a news platform, it is also because of the news function that Weibo receives more state intervention. Recent incidents show the sign of tightening control of Weibo. In order to avoid more state intervention that could lead to further shrink of profit, Sina had considered a transformation of Weibo, from a news platform to a social network platform. However, this transformation is not as successful as expected. Weibo is still the first choice of platform to report breaking news, mobilize collective actions, and push the traditional media and the officials in charge to take proper actions.

A report recently produced by the Reuters Institute outlines a number of relevant details and recent trends of state control and journalistic use of Weibo. This report shows a decline of Weibo's influence since 2012, with a shrinking number of users. The report listed several reasons for this decline, the most important one being the tightening state control. It is not only in the forms of real-name registration, prohibiting certain topics, and the monitoring of specific users, but also through officials' direct participation of Weibo. Another reason is the natural shift to newly emerging services, such as WeChat, a mobile application of Tencent, Sina's major competitor. Unlike the micro-blogging service, WeChat focuses on small group communication with friends and acquaintances (Bei, 2013), by which regular Weibo users, including individuals and institutions, are

opening accounts in WeChat and receive feeds on a regular basis. In this way WeChat is already playing a significant role in spreading news and opinions, akin to that of Weibo.

However, the features of “friend circles” and “individual subscription” that characterize WeChat suggest that it is still a closed circle of communication. Weibo, on the other hand, remains a public platform, where everyone can see everything being posted. It is this kind of publicness that is lacking in the discussion of political issues in China.

Moreover, as a news platform, Weibo is more likely to be sustained by the constant occurrence of news events than social media platforms that features networking.

Therefore, it is too early to say that WeChat will be able to completely replace Weibo. Instead, the future could bring more cross-platform collaboration and mobilization in public events, and other platforms like WeChat could play a backstage role of small group deliberation and mobilization, Weibo, however, may yet remain the primary platform by which those archives become public.

Appendix A

Call for Participation

Dear all,

My name is Le Han. I am a Ph.D. candidate at Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, United States. My dissertation is about how social media, represented by Weibo, have changed the way we report and remember public events. For the purpose of doing my dissertation research, I am now calling for voluntary participants for online and offline interviews. If you consider yourself as a frequent user of Weibo (Sina), and meet **one of** the following requirements or more, or if you know someone who may meet one requirement, you are more than welcome to participate and spread the words.

1. You are working or worked as journalists, editors, producers, or commentators, not necessarily based in mainland China.
2. You contribute column articles or special reports for mainstream media (including newspapers, magazines, radio/television, and portal websites) on a regular basis or occasionally, not limited to media outlets in mainland China.
3. You are a researcher on media-related topics, not necessarily based in mainland China.
4. You used mobile devices or computers to witness and post breaking news and made necessary updates and follow-up reports.
5. You frequently post archival photographs or actively engage in discussion of historical issues in modern times.
6. You are not working for traditional media outlets, but you actively participate in the discussion of public events and are identified by others as an opinion leader of public events.

The interviews will include questions about your experience using Internet, especially Weibo, and your experience in participating the reporting and discussion of major public events on Weibo. These interviews will be used for the sole purpose of academic research. I will keep your personal information confidential. You will be assigned a pseudo name, which will be used in my dissertation.

If you are willing to participate, please leave me a message or email me so we can schedule our meeting. We can use one of the instant message tools, QQ, msn, Weibo message, Gtalk and Skype, to do the interview. I will be in Beijing from late July to early August 2012, for offline interview. Offline interview will be recorded with a digital recorder. Depending on each case, the total amount of time of the interview will range from 60 to 90 minutes. We will do some follow-ups if necessary.

Contact me : lhhan@asc.upenn.edu

My profile page :

<http://www.asc.upenn.edu/Students/Graduate/GraduateStudentProfile.aspx?id=114&pageType=grad>

Note: In order to qualify for this research, you need to be 18 years (born no later than August 1, 1994) and older, and communicable in Chinese.

(Note: Original text in Chinese)

Appendix B

List of interview participants

(In alphabetic order)

Crystal: journalist, now working for an Internet company

David: Sina employee, the operations team of Weibo

Fly: journalist (in Shanghai)

FW: newspaper editor, former web product manager (in Guangzhou)

George: former journalist, writer, professor of journalism

Irene: Sina employee, web designer

John: media researcher

Kitty: radio journalist

Leo: Sina employee, data center

Mike: writer, journalism researcher

Oscar: investigative journalist

Phoebe: graduate student, participant of the Dalian PX protest

Robert: vice editor-in-chief of a financial magazine, investigative journalist

Steven: former investigative journalist (interview conducted in April 2010)

Teresa: media researcher, worked for television stations

Tom: Sina employee, the operations team of Weibo, former web editor of Sina News

Tony, editor-in-chief of a monthly magazine, former journalist

William, media researcher

Appendix C

Major topical events

“July 23” high-speed railway accident and anniversary commemoration (“July 23” or “high-speed train accident”)

On the night of July 23, 2011, two high-speed trains crashed near Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, which is in southeast China. The accident caused severe consequences, with 40 people died. The accident was soon reported on Weibo, as the passengers used cellphones to send cries for rescue via Weibo and did live broadcast of the updates. When people on site reported that the rescue team started to smash and bury the wreck instead of another attempt to rescue more people, Weibo users began to criticize the Minister of Railways.

The anger and suspicion fermented with the government’s reluctance to announce the number of victims and their names and identities. People began to question the Ministry of Railways for the speedy construction of high-speed railways in China. On the night of July 29, 2011, all media outlets in China received the prohibition from the state, which caused the cancellation of newspaper pages nationwide, and further enraged the journalists and the general public when the cancelled pages were posted on Weibo. At its anniversary a year later, all online and offline commemoration activities were cancelled due to the state’s intervention. Newspapers, again, received prohibition from the state to cancel their pages in memory of “July 23”.

Beijing Thunderstorm (July 21, 2012)

A thunderstorm hit Beijing on July 21, 2012, lasted till late night, and the whole city was flooded. While doing live broadcast of situations in different parts of the city, Weibo users started criticizing the poor quality of the city's drainage system. Newspapers and magazines were asked to cancel their stories about this thunderstorm. Posts that criticized the Beijing local government were deleted.

School shuttle accidents in rural China

In November and December 2011, two accidents of school shuttles happened in rural China with school children died, both due to overloaded vehicle. These two accidents attracted wide range of public attention on the safety of children in China.

The Yueqing Incident (or the case of Qian Yunhui, January 2012)

It refers to a strange case, which seemed to be a traffic accident but was suspected to be a murder. It took place in a village of Zhejiang Province. A village head named Qian Yunhui was found dead beneath a truck. Qian had good relationship with the villagers, as he was active in helping the ordinary villagers to protect their property rights and fighting against other corrupted officials who were violating these property rights. Upon his death, the villagers believed that he was murdered. This case, once being posted on Weibo, receive huge controversy and discussion, and later on, independent investigators went to the village attempting to find more evidence of a murder. Although seemingly plausible, it was still lack of evidence. The Weibo exposure of the incident caused great pressure on the local government.

Environmental protests

In 2007, citizens in Xiamen, a southeast coastal city, organized a protest against the landing of a P-xylene chemical factory. The Internet forum, blogs, and mobile phones were the major tools for mobilization and organization. The protest was successful and the local government cancelled the project in the end.

In the years of 2011 and 2012, there were several similar protests in different parts of China, which echoed what happened in Xiamen years ago. This time, Weibo became the major mobilization tool and news platform. In August 14, 2011, people in Dalian, a northeast coastal city, went to the streets to protest against a P-xylene factory in its suburb. The protesters used Weibo to do live broadcast. Police conducted violence in the protest and was recorded by cellphones.

In July 2012, another similar incident took place in Shifang, a small city in the southwest Sichuan Province, which was also one of the major cities hit by the earthquake in 2008. This time, people were gathering in front of the city hall to protest against the launching of a huge metallic processing factory, which produces Mo-Cu (Molybdenum-Copper) and was considered an environmental hazard. The protest involves police violence, and was also recorded by cellphones. Finally the local government had to cancel the project. Only several weeks after Shifang, another protest took place in Qidong, Jiangsu Province. This time it was against the pollution of a Japanese-owned paper-making factory, and the local government cancelled the project after the protest.

Wukan Protest

In September 2011, villagers of Wukan village in Guangdong Province started a protest targeting the local government, for the officials sold the farmlands to real estate

developers at very low prices, without the consent of the villagers. The protest reached its climax in December, when one of the villager-elected representatives was taken to the local police and died there suddenly. The villagers overthrew the local government, and it was besieged by local police.

Anti-Japan riots

In September 2012, in major cities of China, people went to the streets to “boycott Japanese goods” after a territorial dispute between China and Japan. This movement quickly escalated to violence, as people smashed Japanese-brand cars and even beat Japanese citizens.

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