An opinion leader and the making of a city on China's Sina Weibo

Wilfred Wang

Introduction

Diaoyu Islands are China’s, but Guangzhou is ours!

(Diaoyu Dao shi Zhongguo de, er Guangzhou shi WoMen de!)

The territorial dispute between China and Japan over the Diaoyu Islands (the Senkaku Islands in Japanese) in September 2012 triggered nationwide protests.1 Since Guangzhou was one of the main protest sites, thousands of people from other parts of China travelled there to launch their campaign against Japan. However, the protest turned violent as protesters damaged private and business properties in Guangzhou. In responding to these disruptions, some local commentators launched a Weibo [microblog] campaign to boycott the anti-Japan protest to protect Guangzhou from chaos and disruptions. The phrase 'Diaoyu Islands are China’s, but Guangzhou is ours!' was the

1 Since the focus of this chapter is China, I will use the Chinese term 'Diaoyu Islands' instead of the Japanese term 'Senkaku Islands'.
Making Publics, Making Places

campaign slogan. Many Guangzhou’s Weibo users were quick to follow by re-posting the message to their own networks.

This chapter examines the role of an opinion leader on Sina Weibo who conducted the online campaign that countered the nationwide anti-Japan protests in Guangzhou. Specifically, I focus on those online practices by the opinion leader and his followers which have reproduced the sense of locality of Guangzhou, the southern Chinese city near Hong Kong and Macau.

Current literature has established that the communication process in public communication is indirectly mediated through a few individuals — opinion leaders — who present their knowledge, expertise and authorities over the issue at hand in order to facilitate public engagement and participation (Katz 1957; Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955; Gökçe et al. 2014). However, Sassen (2011, p. 574) argues that contemporary political practices are increasingly related to ‘the production of “presence”’. In other words, the formation of the publics and the reproduction of place are intricately connected, and this spatial-public dialectic redefines the role of opinion leader in the digital era. After determining one local media commentator as the opinion leader during the event, I ask two specific things. First, how did the opinion leader exploit Weibo’s platform and Guangzhou’s inhabitants’ experience of place in order to construct himself as a spatial subject rather than merely as a ‘political leader’? Second, how did he mobilise his Weibo followers to ‘re-make’ Guangzhou during a period of hypernationalism in China?

In order to develop the line of inquiry that connects opinion leader, locality and digital media, I draw on the relational characteristic of place to examine Guangzhou’s experience: the meaning of the city is undergoing constant rebuilding and changes. Because of factors such as Guangzhou’s economic role in facilitating China’s economic reforms since the late 1970s (Vogel 1989) and its geocultural affiliation with Hong Kong (Fung & Ma 2002) and the overseas Chinese communities (Faure 2007), the city has developed a distinctive local identity. These factors guide my analysis in the following ways. First, I provide a conceptual discussion about the notion of place and city below. Specifically, I draw on an interdisciplinary approach to develop a framework that focuses on the digital formation of local place in China. Following that, I frame the anti-Japan demonstrations in relation to Weibo use, and locate the social controversies caused by the demonstrations against China’s asymmetric spatial arrangements. I then make a brief note on the research methods I have used. Finally, I discuss the role of the opinion leader in facilitating the sense of locality and place in Guangzhou.

2 This phrase was used by local mainstream media including the state-run Guangzhou Daily, which used this phrase in their official Weibo account on 18 September 2012 (http://www.weibo.com/1887790981/yCoKg96Pl?from=page_1002061887790981_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1474524387853) to call for rationality and calmness in the anticipated anti-Japan demonstrations in Guangzhou.
City, place — A brief overview

This chapter builds on two conceptual premises to develop an interdisciplinary approach. First, I draw on cultural geographers’ concept of relational ontology to emphasise the pluralistic and transformative natures of a geographic place — such as that of Guangzhou. This is not new, as geographers generally conceive that a place has to be understood in relation both to its broader structural transformations (Relph 1976; Harvey 1969, 1989; Castells 1989, 2009), and to people’s bodily practices and daily routines (de Certeau 1984; Kekou 2013). The intellectual origin I draw upon here is therefore similar to Kennedy et al.’s emphasis on the processual qualities of place as discussed in their chapter in this book (Chapter Twelve), seeing place as a site of discourse contestation and power interactions. In other words, even though a place is geographically fixed, its meanings shift over time. Second, I also accept that the communication process is mediated and filtered through a few individuals — opinion leaders (Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955). Opinion leaders present their knowledge, expertise and authorities over the issue at hand in order to enact public engagement and participation (Wright 2006; Dubois & Gaffney 2014).

These two approaches intertwine with each other in the sense that while they can complement each other’s limitations, in doing so they also critically expand the conceptualisation of collective actions in a digital era. First, the study of geography is an inquiry into the multiple communicative processes that produce and disseminate geographic knowledge. Since public communication is always mediated by a small number of individuals, the dissemination of geographic knowledge has likewise always been processed by a handful of individuals/institutions — through, for example, textbooks, mass media and other cultural and social institutions. In the case of China, geographic knowledge and information are either mediated by social institutions such as school (Judge 2002), or by online communities (Wang 2015), or by grassroots creative artists (Liu & Cai 2014). In the same vein, communication facilitated by opinion leaders is spatially defined. These individuals exert their authority and influence in relation to the social experience and cultural expression of the physical place. The knowledge and expertise of any given opinion leader are not universally applicable or recognised. In other words, opinion leaders are not merely political figures who represent a certain class ideology; they are essentially spatial subjects who narrate the lived experience for — and to — a spatially defined audience.

By synthesising the two approaches in relation to China, I am informed by William Hurst’s (2008) study on Chinese laid-off workers’ collective actions. In learning about the framing and discourse used by the protest leaders of laid-off workers’ movements across China, Hurst (2008) identifies three different regional political economies (regional frames) which are used to mobilise and frame collective actions. As a result, the modes of action and the ways that protesters perceive potential
gains or costs in seeking redress also differ across China. Hurst (p. 86) points out that 'specific lived experience of otherwise unconnected individuals shapes worldviews in important ways'. In other words, there are no universal 'working-class struggles' across China; instead, protest leaders in different regions 'localise' their framing rhetoric to enact different modes of collective movements, which carry different sets of demands and pursuits.

Hurst's study is telling, as it indicates that opinion leaders do not merely incite shared class-grievances; they 're-map' local people's collective memories and knowledge of the physical place to determine the mode, requirements and tactics of their actions. Henceforth, it seems as though any collective action is essentially an embodying process that encapsulates the experiential dimension of a place (Prieto 2011). Since the experience of place 'can be either real or imagined', the meanings of a physical place are being 'constantly reinterpreted and reclassified' (Sen & Silverman 2014, p. 3). In the same vein, de Certeau (1984, p. 93) states that a city is 'defined and created' by its citizens' mundane everyday practices. 'Walking', for example, is an elementary form of physical motion which we practise to experience the city (p. 94). Such bodily movements and physical motions map our knowledge of, and personal networks within, the spatial structure (de Certeau 1984) and bring us into different places (Casey 1993).

To think about de Certeau's illustration of the bodily mapping of a city in a digital context would require some clarification. While it is true that these embodiment practices are now increasingly 'digitised' (Kekou 2013), to simply conceive that digital media have provided the 'space' (Zheng 2007) and the 'resources' (Eltantawy & Wiest 2011) for us to perform these practices is problematic. It might instead be worth considering how digital media enact new bodily practices that enrich and complicate the embodiment of geography (Farman 2012). Digital media have primarily subsumed some of the duties of our bodies in mapping and making places — duties such as walking. The navigation and imagination of the physical location are increasingly expressed through the transmission and dissemination of data in the form of textual and audiovisual materials (Graham, Zook & Boulton 2012). However, these data are locally specific as our bodily practices, spatial movements and physical motions in the material world continue to define, characterise and attach meanings to these digital representations.

The digitisation of embodiment will facilitate new interpretations, dynamics and cultural understanding, thus inventing new bodily practices to be performed and carried out in a physical sense. These practices, as Farman (2012, p. 36) puts it, dissolve our sense of the virtual into the material world; they enact what he terms as 'the transformation of space into place', so that the virtual representations (re) produce our actual sense of the physical surroundings (p. 40). Farman (2012) links his arguments to Casey's notion of emplacement (1993), which emphasises the
'situational characteristics' of our sense of place. In other words, information is non-transferable universally (Farman 2012, emphasis in the original, p. 42) but we (as social agents) 'contextualise' the information in accordance with different situations. The job of contextualising the knowledge and information rests on the shoulder of opinion leaders. As discussed, public communication is always mediated through the opinion leader who needs to renarrate and reproduce the sense of a place in order to foster the collective bodily practices of place remaking.

China’s spatial politics and the anti-Japan demonstrations

The event of anti-Japan demonstrations was a result of a series of diplomatic disputes between China and Japan over the maritime sovereignty of the Diaoyu Islands, offshore of Taiwan, in 2012. The tipping point came as the Japanese government issued a formal statement claiming its acquisition of three of the islands in the region on 11 September (Fujimura 2012). The timing, however, coincided with the anniversary of the Mukden Incident — Japan’s conquest of part of northeast China on 18 September 1931, which marked the beginning of its invasion of China during World War II. In 2012, Chinese people took their anger to the internet to call for street protests. In responding to the online campaign, more than 60 000 people staged protests at more than twenty-eight major Chinese cities (including Hong Kong) on 15 September (BBC Chinese 2012). However, many people did not protest in their local city but travelled to different major cities to voice their anger, one of those cities being Guangzhou.

Although the protests were initially peaceful, they later turned violent, as some protesters allegedly committed violent acts, including smashing Japanese-brand cars, shop fronts and even stealing properties from Japanese-owned shops. In Guangzhou, major business districts became paralysed and public transportation experienced major disruptions due to the protest and its related violent activities (Spegele & Nakamichi 2012). Protesters threw rocks to smash the windows of the luxury and heritage Garden Hotel because it hosts the Japanese consulate (Wu 2012).

While the issue in contention was that the protesters had seriously disrupted the lives and social order of Guangzhou, the city has a long history of struggle with the central state governed by the Chinese Communist Party [CCP] over the issues of cultural identity and geosubjectivity (Faure 2007; Wang 2015). China has one of the world’s oldest and most enduring systems of territorial hierarchy, which can be dated back to the Han Dynasty (from 206 BC to 220 AD); this hierarchy was arranged vertically to ensure that imperial decrees and central policy guidelines were disseminated throughout the district, the county and the township (Oakes & Schein 2006; Wang 2005). Such a spatial arrangement aims to ‘prevent power from slipping from centre to the periphery’ (Whitney 1970 in Wang 2005, p. 10). The CCP then adopted this spatial administrative and ruling philosophy when it came to power in
1949. A Chinese local place is deemed to serve the agenda and interests of the national subject, rather than being able to assert its own subjectivity (Judge 2002).

In the case of Guangzhou, since the city is the 'transferring terminal' for millions of migrant workers moving to the Pearl River Delta region (Vogel 1989), the rapid economic and demographic changes underpin constant social tensions between locals and outsiders over employment, social security and even family stability (Cheung 2002). Further, Guangzhou's geolingual proximity with Hong Kong also ensures that it has developed a distinct local identity for itself. However, local identity can be problematic for the CCP, as it can fall outside of the agenda of nation building and nationalism. This was evident, for example, when the government attempted to abolish Cantonese broadcasting on television in 2010 (Wu 2010). The proposal triggered thousands of citizens of Guangzhou to protest on the street (2010). The CCP's cultural policy over time is a form of displacement (Relph 1976), which refers to the conquering of place as modernity displaces traditional folk traditions. In contrast, the formation of a place-centric identity and the project to renarrate those places are examples of efforts to counter what de Certeau (1984, p. 161) terms the expansion of the "techno-structural" urban landscape'. In doing so, the geo-embodying process provides the moral justifications (purpose) and the contextual knowledge (information) needed to operationalise collective practices and movements (Farman 2012), which both are facilitated by, and enable the emergence of, opinion leaders.

A note on method

I collected two sets of Weibo posts as data from Guangzhou between 15 September and 18 September 2015 — during and after the weekend of the anti-Japan demonstrations. The first set of data helped to determine opinion leader(s), as I had little knowledge about who the individual(s) would be at the time of research. The second set of data helped me to gain insights into the opinion leader's practice and his interactions with followers in mapping Guangzhou's local values and identity.

I collected the first set of data through searching for two different but related key phrases:

1. 'Guangzhou is ours' (广州是我们的) — this was the campaign slogan
2. 'Anti-Japan' (抗日) — this was a broader reference to the incidents at the time.

I utilised Weibo's advanced search function, which offers the filtering options of 'time range' and 'location' to generate those Weibo entries from Guangzhou posted from 15 September to 18 September 2012. I retrieved 15 766 entries (original posts and comments) by searching the first key phrase and 4412 posts (original posts and comments). I followed established typologies which focus on the regularity of posting (Graham & Wright 2013) and the response rate in the forms of 're-post' and
'comments' (Cha et al. 2010; Bruns & Burgess 2012) at a particular time and space (an event) to determine the authority and potential influence of individuals. In relation to Weibo, Zhang and Pentina (2012, p. 316) further state that opinion leaders should display strong awareness of civic rights to provide moral judgments to controversial issues. This of course, relates to China’s one-party political structure and the limited freedom of political expression (King, Pan & Roberts 2013).

By following these typologies, I determined that Chen Yang, a local media commentator, was the opinion leader during the anti-Japan demonstrations in Guangzhou. He has 267,414 followers and posted regularly during the anti-Japan demonstration weekend — thirty-five entries in total, or more than eight entries per day. Excluding the most popular entry (posted at 02:45am on 16 September 2012), his entries on average were re-posted 2462 times and received 195 comments during the research period. These figures outperformed the average number of re-posts (7.5 re-posts) and comments (20.6 comments) of other opinion leaders in the data. Further, Chen’s most well-received entry was re-posted 44,211 times, receiving 210 'likes' and 9615 replies (comments). In other words, this post alone accounts for more than 50 per cent of the total number of re-posts and comments in the dataset.

Having determined Chen as the opinion leader, I generated the second set of data by collecting all of his thirty-five entries during the research period. I then specifically focused on the fifteen entries he posted on 18 September 2012, the peak of the nationwide demonstrations. On average, each entry was re-posted more than 418 times and received more than 195 comments. I also collected all of the 9615 replies to the most well-received entry in order to examine the interactions between Chen and his followers. The remainder of this chapter discusses my major findings in relation to the formation of Chen as a spatial subject and his role in facilitating the bodily practices of remaking Guangzhou on Weibo.

Discussion

As the purpose of this chapter is to understand Chen’s role in facilitating the formation of a local public through the reproduction of the place of Guangzhou during the controversies of the hypernationalistic sentiment in 2012, it is important to unpack the nature of an opinion leader in relation to Weibo’s platform. Chen’s status as an opinion leader was both platform-orientated and socially constructed. Since its launch in 2009, Weibo has been a ‘celebrity forum’ that preferences the views and opinions of established and well-known public figures (Wang 2015). Weibo has both verified and non-verified users. Verified accounts (V-accounts) affirm the social status and political power (both mainstream and grassroots) of certain individuals. Such accounts have gone through an identity verification process by submitting proof of identity.
(China’s Identity Card, a passport, or documentation that proves the legitimacy of an organisation) to Weibo in order to be endorsed, and thus are generally perceived as more trustworthy (Huang & Sun 2014). The views expressed, and the information provided, by V-accounts normally attract more online traffic and attention than non-verified accounts. Consequently, V-accounts generally have more followers than non-verified accounts (Huang & Sun 2014). This fosters a culture on Weibo in which users are inclined to ‘follow’ established public figures (Zhang & Pentina 2012).

However, Weibo users are highly selective in the V-accounts they follow. Chen’s Weibo posts during the research period actually outperformed the entries posted by such public accounts as the local police (@GZpolice), news outlets and other verified individual accounts. This is probably because Chen has been critical of the mainstream establishments in China, which is consistent with the view that an opinion leader generally works outside of the mainstream political institutions (Gökçe et al. 2014).

Chen’s perceived detachment from the establishment relates to his ongoing efforts to construct himself as a spatial, local subject of Guangzhou rather than as a loyal media personality who follows the party line. In other words, Chen’s status as an opinion leader is socially constructed and culturally embedded. This is illustrated through his Weibo account name, ‘Guangzhou Chen Yang’, which explicitly emphasises his association with the local city as part of his online persona. Chen’s ‘offline’ reputation of being a critic of the local and state government’s wrongdoings over time (RFA 2009) further reinforces his subversive persona. Chen hosts current affair programs at Guangzhou Television and writes columns for the Southern Metropolis Daily — one of the most well-known news outlets pursuing investigative journalism in China (Zhao 2008). He generally conducts his television programs in Cantonese instead of in the official Mandarin. This is in defiance of Article 21 of the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television [SAPRFT] code, which asserts that ‘broadcasting hosts shall be the role model to actively promote the popularization of Mandarin, use standard and correct form of written Chinese, and defend the integrity of the motherland’s spoken and written language’ (Liu 2004). Chen’s defiance not only reinforces his ‘non-establishment’ status but also allows him to facilitate the formation of a geopublic through the transmission and circulation of his Cantonese broadcasting.

As a result, Chen has received widespread public support in Guangzhou, with many Guangzhou citizens calling him ‘Chen Sir’. The English word ‘Sir’ means ‘teacher’ and ‘mentor’, which, in contemporary Cantonese, is an expression of respect. Public support for Chen was evident when there was speculation that he had been axed from his regular television program because of making critical remarks against party officials (RFA 2009). In response to the development, thousands of posters with the phrase ‘Chen Sir, I support you!’ suddenly appeared across Guangzhou’s streets and online forums (Southern Weekly 2009) in support of him.
By thinking of Chen as a spatial subject, whose authority and expertise are locally defined and embedded in Guangzhou’s geography, we can understand his Weibo presence through the perspective of emplacement. As previously mentioned, the formation of a public is closely related to the creation of people’s collective sense of geo-belonging. This involves the integration of bodily practices and digital media use. As I collected all of Chen’s Weibo entries during the anti-Japan demonstrations weekend (15-18 September 2012), it became obvious to me that Chen mapped the spatial progressions and movements of the anti-Japan demonstrations on Weibo.

On 18 September at 19:03, for example, Chen posted: 'Just walked past some mass gatherings, and saw that people were communicating with each other through some walkie-talkie devices … [T]hey were all speaking in Mandarin!' Later on, at 19:35, he re-posted a Weibo update from the Guangzhou police’s Weibo account stating that 'a large crowd was gathering in the area near the zoo (a central city area), causing traffic delays'. Chen added his comments in the re-posting: 'Please beware and co-operate with the traffic police’s jobs. Pray for our city!' Later on in the evening, at 20:33, he posted: 'Our [Guangzhou’s] police have finished the cleanup of the demonstrations areas, which should put an end to the whole thing! Good job!' Towards the end of the evening, at 21:04, Chen questioned the demonstrations: So these protest brigades have been marching from Huanshidong Road [the main drive way in the western district] to Tianhe [an eastern district], circulating the entire Guangzhou. They created so much traffic chaos and inconveniences; can’t they just stay at one place so we can express patriotism [aiguo] and live normally [shenghuo] at the same time?

These entries not only illustrate Chen’s active presence on Weibo, but also show that in posting his entries he was effectively mapping Guangzhou in relation to the events. His entries became the new ‘maps’ of Guangzhou, which provided guidance and direction for locals to help them live through unexpected changes in their situation. These entries also underpinned Chen’s strong awareness of the particular affordances Weibo has as a platform. While re-posting is a common feature that users (including Chen) used to disseminate news and information, it is worth noting that Chen has also made use of Weibo’s portable feature (available as an app on smart phones) to maintain his regular posting. This is evident from the data as Weibo posts contain information on ‘posting source’ (laiyuan). Three out of the five entries mentioned above were posted via Chen’s smart phone, and eighteen out of his thirty-five entries (over the research period) were posted via his smart phone.

We can thus contend that Chen’s ‘on-the-move’ style of Weibo posting during the anti-Japan demonstrations constructs what McQuire (2008, pp. 146-7) calls ‘the

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4 Chen’s posts were originally written in Chinese. All translations in this chapter are provided by the author of this chapter.
mobile public'. The public no longer stays at a specific location but has the flexibility to 'move' with the temporal and spatial developments of the events (the demonstrations) and the issues (the chaos and disruptions). This is not to say that the public becomes placeless; to the contrary, the making of the public now relies on the circulation and dissemination of the networks, which are enabled by the bodily practices of posting, recording and navigating on Weibo.

In addition to his own online mapping of the demonstration, Chen further utilised these techno-bodily practices to interact with his followers. As mentioned elsewhere, Chen’s most well-received entry from the datasets was posted on 16 September 2012 at 02:45. The post reads as follows:

Please do not describe those protesters on the street as ‘patriots’; they are not emotionally charged and doing stupid things (destroying Japanese goods and shops in Guangzhou). They in fact knew very well what they were doing, and had everything planned in advance. Dear fellow Guangzhouers [jiefang], if any of you see them on the street, take a step back and photograph them (as evidence). Let’s isolate them from the protesting scenes, so we know exactly who they are. Diaoyu Islands are China’s, Guangzhou is ours. Please be safe, Guangzhou [Guangzhou pingan].

In this entry, Chen not only reconstructed the chaotic scenes, which resulted from the damage done by the protesters (whom he called the ‘fake patriots’), but also called upon his followers to ‘photograph’ those who had caused troubles as a way to defend Guangzhou inhabitants’ rights and ownership of their hometown.

In order to access his followers’ response to these suggestions, I generated a sample of 990 posts from the 9615 comments through a systematic sampling method (every ninth post is sampled). The words Pai and Zhao (both mean ‘photograph’) were mentioned fifty-four times in the sample. Some Weibo users even made quite detailed suggestions about how to take photos of violent protesters. A Weibo user (16 September 2012) suggested:

Use your smart phone to capture the image of those people; if you can, take a few more pictures with an SLR Camera as it can produce higher image quality, showing their faces, and then put on the internet for a human flesh search!

Another user posted at 12:48 on 16 September 2012, agreeing: ‘Do not just weiguan [surround and look], but take and upload a photo of them, to make their face public, to let their friends and family know how ugly their actions are!’ Not only have these responses reaffirmed Chen’s opinion leadership status, but they have also clearly responded to his call for action. Such comments illustrate the convergence of Weibo’s platform features and Guangzhou’s society as Chen has effectively exploited Weibo’s

5 Human flesh search (renrou sousuo) is a collective online practice to ‘track down offline individuals by employing as many computer users as possible in the search’ (Herold 2011, p. 129).
functions of visualisation and archiving to gather and foster collective response and participation.

The practice of photographing has two layers of implication. First, photographing enabled people to visualise Guangzhou’s streets in order to provide needed geographic information and knowledge about the development of the nationalistic demonstrations. Second, the practice of photographing enacted the extended practices of ‘archiving’ and ‘searching’. Boyd (2010) identifies four primary affordances of social media: persistence, replicability, scalability and searchability. These four types of affordances allow textual and audio-visual data to be preserved and transmitted across time and space. Photographing, as a bodily practice in a physical place, penetrates these four technical affordances of Weibo, as images can be stored (persistence), re-posted and shared (replicability) in order to enlarge the visibility of the campaign (scalability). Further, the practice of photographing allows extended techno-bodily practices of human-flesh search (searchability), as suggested by some of Chen’s followers. The formation of a Guangzhou public at the time could be what Boyd (2010) calls the ‘networked public’, which was enabled by those bodily and digital practices initiated by Chen.

The integration between bodily and online practices shows that the virtual and the physical are not mutually exclusive but, to use Farman’s (2012, p. 46) words, they are ‘mutually constructed’. The mapping and visualisation of Guangzhou could not have happened without Weibo, but Weibo’s platform features would have become meaningless and irrelevant without the lived experience of the city. Chen therefore did not ‘re-map’ Guangzhou himself, but he mobilised his Weibo followers to use their physical bodies to remake Guangzhou collectively.

**Conclusion: Renarrating China**

Despite the anger and discontent evident on Guangzhou’s Weibo, it is crucial to clarify that there was no suggestion that Guangzhou inhabitants thought anything other than that China’s territorial ownership of the Diaoyu Islands was correct. In fact, Chen and most of his followers on Weibo clearly expressed the very strong view that the territorial sovereignty of the islands was critically important in developing a sense of pride for the Chinese identity. Hence, the formation of a geopublic in Guangzhou is not equivalent to a peripheral identity. Many of those comments in support of Chen’s suggestion to ‘photograph’ those irrational protesters made the point that Japan and its people would not have suffered, because the shops and cars were the properties of Chinese and the Japanese firms employed Chinese people. In other words, the process of remapping Guangzhou was not a matter of simply rejecting the overarching national identity; instead, it emphasised Guangzhou’s local interest in parallel with the overarching expression of nationalism.
The paradoxical treatments of the anti-Japan demonstration in 2012 as expressed by Guangzhou Weibo users (including Chen) seemingly illustrate Tilly’s (2010) account of the ‘ambivalent’ state-city relation. While individuals living in the city seek protection and stability from the state, the state also relies on the resources of the city in order to prosper, develop and maintain its ruling legitimacy. The symbiotic relations between the two allows ongoing renegotiations to take place, as the two progress together in an evolving relational process. This ambivalent state-city relationship might have defined Chen’s and his followers’ practices on Weibo. Recreating Guangzhou became a process of renarration of the Chinese nation, thus presenting a vision and an interest that are alternative to those imposed by the nation-state.

This chapter has explored Chen’s role as an opinion leader on Weibo in facilitating the formation of a geopublic in Guangzhou, amid the expansion of the nationalistic movement network in 2012. Chen’s capacity to manipulate Weibo’s technological affordances and the lived experience in Guangzhou enabled him, first, to construct himself as a spatial subject of the city and, second, to construct a geopublic that contested and questioned the legitimacy of a state-imposed notion of nationalism. The online practice of (re)posting, archiving, uploading and searching evolved into the bodily practices of photographing, observing and mapping the city. Such technobodily embodiment encapsulates Guangzhou’s local values on the one hand and the national agenda of border sovereignty on the other. It has thus effectively renarrated an alternative vision of nationhood, one that differs from the state-imposed version.

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