

The Semi-Structured Online Public Sphere in China: Institutional Criteria and Political Functions

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Abstract

This research analyses online political communication in China by applying Habermas' public sphere theory as a normative framework. The three institutional criteria (*equality*, *problematization of unquestioned areas*, and *principally inclusive*) and two political functions (*expressional function* and *corresponding function*) stemming from the public sphere theory act as analytic lenses to analyse the power relations, expressions, languages, and interactions in the communications. By using three events as case studies, this research applies a combination of content and discourse analysis to study them. It argues that there is a semi-structured public sphere in China, in the sense that it is a sphere that shows both promise and limitations in terms of facilitating equal, inclusive, liberal and critical political communications in China. It can act as a normative space for Chinese net-users to communicate about their concerns, but is not powerful enough to put real pressure on government to achieve sustained changes at policy level. Equal and inclusive debates are facilitated as net-users are given equal rights to express their opinions, and these opinions are inclusively available online; but they are also limited since pre-existing status has not been dis-regarded. Opinions generated by social and political elites and media organisations are constructed with pre-determined significance, and as a result, opinions are unequally accessed and valued. Through the online public sphere, Chinese net-users have debated different political issues. Through expressions and linguistic choices that are both critical and creative, they have challenged the government's decisions and roles, and resisted censorship. The government still censors online debates, but has begun to recognise the significance of the online public sphere, and in a limited way, has engaged in communications with net-users, although they treat these communications as ways to promote and reinforce their interests, rather than truly seeking out opinions from the public.

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Introduction

Research Background

This research examines the online public sphere in China by asking the central research question: *how is the online public sphere structured in China?* This question leads the research not only to engage into the academic debates around whether there is an online public sphere in China or not; but also more specifically to discuss what are the factors that contribute to the development of the sphere, what are the factors that restrict it, and what are those factors mean to the online political communications in China. This research applies the public sphere theory as a theoretical framework, to discuss the online political communication in China. By suggesting ‘online political communication in China’, this research refers to the phenomenon that individuals are debating about politics, communicating with others about their political opinions, and challenging and criticising the Chinese government, by using the Internet as the primary platform, in China. In this research, Habermas’s (1989:1) ‘bourgeois public sphere’ would not be the ultimate example to simulate because it serves as a particular historical category rather than a universally applicable example; but rather this research regards the normative framework provided by the public sphere theory can go beyond the historical context, to study contemporary China. Applying this framework, this research asks the ‘structure’ of the public sphere, because the public sphere is not a naturally out-there space, but rather one that needs to be institutionalised upon certain institutions to deliver political functions. This process of institutionalising the sphere to make it functional, is the process of structuring this sphere. To study the structure of the online public sphere, this research particularly discusses the power relations among participants of online debates around political issues, the power relations

between the net-users and the Chinese governments, and the interactions among net-users, and between them and the authority.

It is important to study the online political communication in China. Because debating online has become an indispensable part in China. Statistics from China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) show that by the end of 2016, 53.2% of Chinese population were net-users (CNNIC 2017). With half of the population now going online, scholars have observed that the Internet has been used as a space, where individuals not only entertain, but also gather and express their opinions on political issues and public affairs, to debate with other individuals, and even to engage the Chinese government in discussions about particular policies and governmental actions (Zheng, 2008: 104-107, Zhang and Lin, 2014: 21, Mou, Atkin and Fu, 2011:343-345, Lewis, 2013: 679, 697-699). These communications take place between different players in the society: including ordinary citizens who use the Internet to express opinions about political issues and their political concerns; media organisations who uses the Internet to have influences over political opinions; and the government who controls the online information but has also begun to engage into online debates. From studying the expressions, languages, and opinions in the online political communications, the knowledge about how the Chinese public discuss political issues, how they interact with each other, and how they criticise and communicate with the government, can be furthered.

Indeed, there has been an increasing academic attention given to the online political communications in China, and a central concept scholars have used to analyse the formation, the function and influence of the communications, is that of the online public sphere in China.

Academic Debates around the Online Public Sphere in China

The concept of the public sphere is spoken of by Habermas as a critical sphere in which ‘private people come together as a public... against public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations...’ (Habermas, 1989: 27). He suggests it is a space, where ‘the public use of their reason’ to debate on political issues, to challenge authorities, to generate public opinion, to realise their political status as citizens and to ‘give the normative status of an organ for the self-articulation of civil society with a state authority corresponding to its needs’ (Habermas, 1989: 74). Habermas’ original studies of the public sphere were conducted within the western historical context of 17th century Europe and his model of the bourgeois public sphere remains historical. But the concept of a public sphere has been applied beyond this specific historical context, as one of the most used normative frameworks, to critically discuss the state and social communications in contemporary societies, particularly in democratic ones (Goode, 2005: 3-4, Mckee 2005: vii, 6).

In recent year, public sphere theory has been applied beyond the western context, in discussions about political communications in non-democratic nations, including China (Liu and McCormick: 2011, Cao, 2006: 49). This is because the public sphere theory can act as normative framework that offers critical criteria for examining and analysing the formation and importance of political communications. It proposes equality, inclusiveness, rationality and the criticalness of the debates as crucial aspects and elements in political communications that scholars need to examine (Habermas, 1989: 37). It also identifies the different players in the communications that are crucial: the private individuals, the public, the media, and governments (Habermas, 1989; 1 and 169). These elements and players are equally important to study political communication in non-democratic political countries, such as China, as they are for democratic ones. Although Habermas’s (1989: 81-83)

discussion of the public sphere was based on his observations of bourgeois states, in which freedom of opinions, of speech, and of assembly and association, are the constitutional principles, so his conceptualisation of the public sphere as an independent communicative space to holding the government into account can be relatively better realised by these constitutional principles. Still, this does not mean that only individuals in bourgeois states are entitled to such a space, nor does it mean that the public sphere is only valid in democratic societies. For individuals who live in non-democratic nations, such as China, although the one-party regime constantly monitors and censors online political debates, the desire to express and exchange opinions on political issues and public affairs, and the intention to fight for a more independent public arena to facilitate such debates, continue to exist despite government restrictions. The attempts to engage in equal, inclusive and critical public debates under non-democratic political systems should be equally valued and studied. It is also important to look at authoritarian regimes reactions to public expressions, as they provide insights into the interactions between government and individual in non-democratic contexts. Thus, for scholars, who aim to bring a critical understanding of the communications outside the democratic context, the public sphere theory provides an important framework for analysis. However, rather than blindly relying on Habermas's work, it is necessary to hold a critical position in the discussion. Non-democratic systems should be seen as specific context and any discussions regarding political communication in those systems, needs to take into account the social and political characteristics of the system.

Indeed, the public sphere theory has been applied to study China's context, and scholars have understood Habermas's work in relation to the context, generating a number of different studies and arguments. A few scholars are sceptical about the utility of the application of the public sphere in China. Important among those scholars is Huang, who argues that it is a concept that

was ‘abstracted from early modern and modern Western experience that is inappropriate for China’ (Huang, 1993: 216). But in most studies, the public sphere theory has been used as a normative concept which particularly concern the communication between private individuals and the government of the country (Rosen, 2010).

The application of the public sphere theory in China is especially linked to the emergence of the Internet, and with individuals’ increasing engagement in political debates online. Scholars have been keen to discover whether or not and to what extent, this new medium could be an arena that facilitates critical political debates in China that challenge the authoritarian regime and demonstrate public concern, and to identify what roles the net-users, media and the authorities play in these online communications. While the public sphere theory is a critical and well-established framework that enables that the systematic analysis of these issues (Liu and McCormick, 2011:114, Yang: 2003a, Yang: 2003b). In particular, the concept helps to understand the struggle between Chinese individuals, who are demanding and fighting for a public arena for open and critical debates around political issues, and the Chinese government, who intends to control online political communications but at the same time would also like to be part of it. As Cao puts it, the public sphere theory, when it is applied to understand the power relations and interactions between the state and the public, can help academics to ‘explain and solve modern problems’ that cannot be answered through traditional Chinese theories (Cao, 2006: 49).

Some academics, among whom a key figure is Guobin Yang, believe the Chinese online public sphere has been facilitated between net-users and the government, argue that it is possible to tale of the Chinese online public sphere because ‘the Internet has fostered public debate and problem articulation and demonstrated the potential to play a supervisory role in Chinese politics’ (Yang, 2003b: 454). The Internet, as a new medium, has

provided new arenas for Chinese individuals to publicly debate political issues, and more importantly such new arenas have allowed sceptical views of the governments unlikely to be seen in traditional Chinese media, to be openly articulated and discussed in the public domain. Individuals use the Internet to challenge the government when it has failed to serve their needs, and to fight for more publicly visible debates and for different voices to be heard. Because of its potential in facilitating certain levels of open and liberal political communication in which individuals can express their needs and concerns, scholars like Yang see the online public sphere in a non-democratic China, as preliminary developing, and has already started to function. But they are also careful and critical, who suggest some doubts about the degree to which the online public sphere in China can really change or impact on government behaviours. Far more observations need to be made and critical considerations need to be given to establish whether China's online public sphere is powerful enough to promote democratisation in China.

Alongside observing individuals' active use of the Internet as a platform for communications around political issues and public affairs, government censorship in China has also been a great focus in discussions about the online public sphere. Censorship is particularly discussed because despite the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s promotion of information and communication technology for economic benefits, political control over online debates has not been loosened (Wu, 1996:700- 701, King, Pan and Roberts 2013: 237-238, Li, 2010: 73-74, Tai, 2014: 186). As Chinese Chairmen Jinping Xi stated in his speech during the first session of the Third Plenum of the 18th CCP Committee on 9th November 2013, 'the reinforcement of ideology should never be loosen and reduced, even during an era when the media sector is going through deep transformation; on the one hand, focus should be concentrated on economic development, but on the other hand, it is essential to hold tightly the powers of leadership, of

management and of discourse over ideology¹. This speech illustrates the Chinese leadership's perception of the media, whereby the media, whether new or traditional, should always serve the ideological interests of the government, and the CCP regime. The power to control, to lead, to manage the discourse and debates around ideology, should always be held by the government in order to prevent losing control over online communications, especially those communications around political issues involving governmental roles and behaviours, which potentially could lead to the emergence of heavy criticism of the regime and public calls for democratisation. The speech also shows that the Chinese government intends to include online communication as a part of party propaganda, to promote and reinforce their own interests, and if possible, to achieve a hegemonic voice over contentious issues. To ensure these principles are realised, the Chinese government has carried out multiple actions to monitor online communications, to censor contents that are regarded as harmful and not suitable for a Chinese socialism ideology, and to encourage party media to go online and speak on behalf of the authorities (Zheng, 2008: 9, Wacker, 2003: 65, Taubman, 1998: 261, Endeshaw, 2004: 46, Ma, Chung and Thorson, 2005: 21). As a result of this monitoring and censorship, online political communications around political issues in China, such as criticism of the one-party regime, or problematization of governmental decisions, can be manipulated, interfered with and even blocked, when those debates are judged as harmful to the CCP's political interests and the stability of the system. Thus not all expressions and debates around all issues find their way into the public domain.

¹ Sourced from People Daily's microblog account. In Chinese:媒体格局深刻变化, 在集中精力进行经济建设的同时, 一刻也不能放松和削弱意识形态工作, 必须把意识形态工作的领导权, 管理权, 话语权牢牢掌握在手中... Access through: <http://ww2.sinaimg.cn/mw1024/a716fd45jw1f15itq24zqj20c80c8q6u.jpg>, and <http://www.weibo.com/2803301701/DiG8mcims?type=repot>, Access through: 28/04/2016

Because of this context of control and censorship, some scholars express more sceptical views towards the idea of an online public sphere in China. Li (2010: 69, 71, 73) for example, indicates that the ‘formation of an online public sphere was seriously jeopardized by the state and the market’, because the authorities has ‘successfully dismantled the online political discussion space’, and ‘[T]he online sphere was transformed from a site encouraging civic virtue to a market place encouraging sensational performance and voyeuristic peeping’. This indicates that although individuals’ political engagements online should be applauded, and indeed some individuals have managed to use online spaces to express their concerns and needs, still the social and political environments in China, especially the political one, have largely restricted the formation of this sphere, and disabled its function. Although a certain level of online political communication can be conducted among individuals to discuss public affairs; still individuals’ debates are strictly monitored by the authorities, to ensure that the generated content does not pose a real threat to the CCP regime, to reduce alternative voices over contentious issues, and also to prevent online debates from generating much offline impacts. Thus, what individuals are allowed to discuss is less than what they are not allowed to do, and discussions around sensitive topics can be removed or manipulated before they reach a wider audience, ensuring that the impact of such discussions is minimised. By doing so, very few real and critical challenges of the government can be generated through online debates and no political transformation or democratisation is likely to be started through online debates. The Chinese government has attempted to manage online debate within its authoritarian rules. Because of these political restrictions, online spaces cannot be said to function as a truly independent organ that facilitates liberal debates, so conceptualisation of a Chinese online public sphere will need more critical discussions.

Different views exist regarding the online public sphere in China, and thoughtful perspectives and researches on this topic have been generated by scholars hold those views, which this research will them explicitly in the Chapter 2. The combination of all those studies and perspectives have contributed to the growing importance given to the debate around online public sphere in China. This research also engages into this big debate around the online public sphere in China. It regards this debate as worth engaging, not only because of the increasing attention given to online political communication in China, but also because of the changing dynamics of online debates in China, which means constant and up-to-date discussions are required.

Research Question

The starting point for this research is that it agrees that the concept of the public sphere is applicable to China, and sees as a valuable framework to examine online political communication in this country. To engage in the current debate and to contribute to the discussion of online political communications in China by applying the public sphere theory, this research asks the question: *how is the online public sphere structured in China?* The value of debating and studying the online public sphere in China is that the public sphere theory provides a normative framework for academics to look into individuals' expressions and power relations in the online debates, and to examine their interactions and communications with the government by using the Internet. Thus, when mapping the online public sphere in China, academics are offered tools with which to draw a comprehensive picture of online political communications, of its increasingly dynamic, as well as the struggle between the government and net-users in the communications.

Public sphere theory is used as a theoretical framework in this research to examine the structure of the online public sphere in China, in terms of

providing analytic lenses through which to analyse the power relations and debates that have emerged on online platforms, and to discuss what they might mean for political communication in China. Thus, instead of asking whether there is an online public sphere in China or not, this research asks how the online public sphere is structured, and through discussions about the 'structure' of such a sphere, it uses the analytic lenses provided by the theory to study online political communications in China.

Overall, this research aligns itself with the views that an online public sphere in China is slowly forming, but argues there are a lot more to be discussed upon current studies. It sees the potentials of online political communications for individuals to express their opinions. At the same time, it also sees the role of government as significant in terms of controlling, censoring and even engaging toward these communications. Discussions about the online public sphere need to be based on a critical understanding of the government's behaviour. Therefore, this research does not intend to provide or disprove an absolute conceptualisation of the online public sphere in China, but rather it wants to take a step back so as to review the formation and development of the sphere. So that the topic, the power relations, the language that is emerging in online political communications can be systemically examined using the public sphere framework. The promises and limitations of the communications and sphere can be both studied.

In addition, this research is quite specific in its focus on the 'online' public sphere, which is predicated on the Internet as its fundamental medium, rather than attempting to investigate the entire public sphere in China, both offline and online. This does not mean that the offline public sphere, if there is one in China, is of no value in academic debates; but rather that this research's primary focus is what happens online, so it cannot make any claims in terms of its wider applicability. Because as stated at the beginning of the chapter, although the number of Chinese net-users is growing, still only half of the

total population are net-users, and this digital divide cannot be ignored. Therefore, while this research does not make claim that can be generalised across online and offline communications in China, it does critically indicate the gap between online and offline communication.

Research Framework

To answer the research question '*how is the Chinese online public sphere structured*', this research establishes an analytic framework based on Habermas' public sphere theory. The specific analytic lenses it abstracts from the public sphere theory is the three institutional criteria and two political functions, which it uses to examine the Chinese online public sphere. The following section explains how this framework is derived from the theory, why it is a powerful framework to examine online political communication in China, and how it can be applied in empirical studies.

Habermas interprets the public sphere as a communicative space between individuals and government, which can be institutionalised upon three institutional criteria: *equality*, *problematization of unquestioned areas* and *principal inclusiveness* (Habermas, 1989: 27-28, 31-37, 54, 85). The institutionalisation of the public sphere means the public sphere needs to be realised through particular institutions, such as literatures, coffee houses, salons, mass media and the Internet. By using those institutions, the public engage into equal, inclusive, critical and liberal political communications, to express their concerns and to engage the government into respond. While these three institutional criteria constitute central analytic lenses when applying the public sphere theory as a normative framework to study political communications. Because in Habermas' work these criteria are what define the public sphere, and by having these criteria, a space can be regarded as a public sphere. The institutions of the public sphere are changing throughout the history from literatures to coffee house and to the media, but the three

institutional criteria concluded by observing the characters of the historical institutions become normative concepts beyond history. The *equality* and *principally inclusive* criteria demonstrate that the public sphere should be open, equal and inclusive: all individuals, regardless of their pre-existing status should have equal rights to engage in debate; access to the sphere should be inclusive and all types of concerns expressed by all types of people should be principally included in this sphere; the expressive rights in the sphere should be equal and inclusive, with no dominating roles taken by certain groups or by the government. With relations among participants predicated on equality and inclusiveness, Habermas also suggests the sphere should be institutionalised upon individuals' rationally-critically, self-determined opinions, in the ways that the meanings of public affairs are problematized by individuals through rational-critical debates, rather than being defined as the public authority's 'components' (Habermas, 1989: 27). This can be achieved through the criterion *problematization of unquestioned areas* criteria. Based on these three institutional criteria, Habermas refers the public sphere as an arena that facilitates political communications that can challenge the public authority, and such communications should be equal, open and inclusive to all, rather than a selective handful of players.

When using the public sphere as an analytic framework, the three criteria are normative lenses show that the power relations among individuals in debates, and the abilities of individuals to problematize the government, are crucial elements to be examined. Only by having equal and inclusive debates, and allowing individuals to challenge the government, is it possible to develop liberal communications within which public opinions and concerns can be expressed.

The three institutional criteria identified by Habermas are conditions which make possible for the institutionalisation of the public sphere. Aside from these criteria, Habermas's work also suggests that the public sphere can

deliver two crucial political functions. Firstly, it enables individuals to express their self-determined concerns, so those concerns can emerge from the private domain into the public realm to critically reflect their needs. This research refers to this function as the *expressional function*, because it reinforces the functions of expression for individuals. Secondly, the public sphere engages public authority in understanding individuals' needs as articulated within public debates in the sphere, which enables the authorities to respond to those needs to best serve the public. This function is referred to as the *corresponding function*, because it reinforces the function of engaging the public authorities in responding to the public concerns correspondingly. Although Habermas did not directly use the phrases *expressional function* and *corresponding function* in his writing, what he has argued about the political functions of the public sphere, can be summaries within these two categories. He stated '[T]he state is the 'public authority'. It owes this attribute to its tasks of promoting the public or common welfare of its rightful members' (Habermas, 1989:2); while '[T]he public sphere as a functional element in the political realm was given the normative status of an organ for the self-articulation of civil society with a state authority corresponding' (Habermas, 1989: 74). What Habermas points out here is that the public authority, namely the authority of the country, as the government, the officials and the organs that works for the government, have the duty to serve its rightful members' needs and interests, while the individual members of the country enjoy their rights of being served by the public authority. The function of the public sphere is to act between private individuals and the public authority to ensure that individuals can inform the public authority of their opinions and needs, while the public authority engage with and respond to them. When the public sphere is functioning, there is a two-way-process involved: firstly, individuals need to *express* their opinions themselves, so their needs can emerge into the public domain via the public sphere; then the authorities need to engage with the opinions through the sphere, to respond to the needs in order to best serve

its people. Only with the involvement of both individuals and the authorities can this sphere fulfil its function. Thus, both expressions in the sphere and responds towards the sphere are crucial. This research uses the phrases *expressional function* and *corresponding function*, to summarise and locate individuals' and public authority's actions in this sphere and to clearly indicate and clarify the characteristics of the two-way process of its political functions, so that the discussion about each of them can be precise and specific.

The two political functions are also defining elements, because they critically demonstrate what the public sphere is doing for the political communications. When the public sphere theory is applied, from questioning whether these two functions have been fulfilled or not, it is possible to discuss whether individuals have the ability to express their opinions, and whether and how, those opinions have been responded by the government. Altogether they demonstrate to what extent the communication between the public and the government has been established.

Habermas's conceptualisation on the public sphere is not without its critics: some have suggested that Habermas's version of the public sphere is too idealist, have questioned whether there is only one public sphere, whether his model is truly equal and inclusive, and have also questioned his over-reinforcement of consensus-seeking rational debates. This research will engage in detail with these critiques in the literature review chapters. However, it will also be argued that despite its limitations, Habermas's model is a useful one. Although the tale of a fully-structured public sphere may be too idealistic, this does not mean that the public sphere as a concept has no explanatory power. Similarly, just because the institutional criteria and political functions Habermas proposes are hard to realise does not mean they have lost their significance. An open, equal and inclusive public sphere where public debates can take place to hold the public authorities in to account, is

still vital for all individuals who seek for free and liberal political communications in any countries.

When applying the theory as a normative organ in analysis, it is necessary to take into consideration not only Habermas's words, but also the important critiques of his works in this field, as well as the different socio-historical contexts to ensure that the theoretical framework is critically built. In other words, the three institutional criteria and two political functions put forward by Habermas should not be seen as absolute principles that all examples of public sphere should meet without critical reflection; but rather, they should be treated as theoretical and methodological concepts that can be critically developed for better application.

The theoretical framework of this research has been developed from the understanding of the public sphere, and the three institutional criteria and two political functions of this sphere are seen as analytic lenses. Its aims to look at the structure of China's online public sphere by assessing whether or not any of these three institutional criteria and two functions can be observed in China's online political debates. If this is the case, how they are manifested. If on the other hand they are not observable or can be observed as limited, the research will discuss what these restrictions are and how they manifest. It is through the process of assessing each of these elements, this research will engage into the academic debate around the Chinese online public sphere.

More specifically, the framework will be applied as follows:

1. To examine the criteria of *equality* and *principal inclusiveness*, this research examines the power relations among crucial participants in political communications to discuss whether or not all rightful members of Chinese society can become participants of such online communications, regardless of their status, and if so, whether or not the rights to debate are equally and inclusively distributed.

2. To examine the *problematization of unquestioned areas* criterion and *expressional political function*, this research assesses two aspects. Firstly, it discusses whether or not participants in the online political communications can self-define or re-define the meanings of public concerns and to problematize unquestioned areas that were once only defined by the Chinese public authority. If so, what areas are problematized, or if not, what are the restrictions. Secondly, it seeks to discuss the language usages in participants' expressions, and what their functions are.
3. Examining the *corresponding function*, this research looks at two aspects: firstly, the role of censorship, which is central to any discussion about political communications China. But more crucially, this research aims to discover whether there is any likelihood that the Chinese public authorities would engage with online debates or even respond to them; and if so, how this is manifested, and which issues and areas they are likely to engage with.

By examining the structure of the Chinese online public sphere through these three steps, this research brings Habermas' conceptualisation of the public sphere into the social and political context of China.

Based on this systemically examinations by applying the three institutional criteria and two political functions as analytic lenses, this research argues that there is a semi-structured online public sphere in China, and that this is the result of a co-existence of structured and unstructured parts within the sphere's institutionalisation process and political functions. The structured parts refer to areas that showed promises, while the unstructured areas are those limitations. The term 'semi-structured' has been chosen: because there are both structured and unstructured parts of the online public sphere, of equal importance, and it is through understanding both that, a balanced and critical account of this sphere can be given. By referring to the sphere as 'semi-

structured' is not to imply it is exactly half built, but rather to emphasize both structured and unstructured parts as equally influential for this sphere and therefore require equal attention.

Contributions of the Research

By analysing the Chinese online public sphere through the analytic framework discussed in this chapter, this research makes three contributions to current debates about the online public sphere and online political communication in China.

Firstly, in existing academic studies, the government-public struggle in the online political communications in China is one of the key theme, making the argument is how Chinese net-users have been using the Internet to fight for more spaces for freedom of speech, alongside the censorship that comes from the Chinese authorities. This research also engages with this key theme of the government-public struggle, but its focuses moves beyond control and censorship from the government, to other types actions that are taken by the authorities to interact with the public. To put it specifically, this study of how the *corresponding function* of China's online public sphere is structured, does not only discuss this function in relations to censorship, but also discover whether or not the Chinese public authority engages with or responds to public debates in the online public sphere that challenge the government, and if so, what form such engagement and respond, and take to what level. By shifting the discussion beyond censorship, this research approaches China's online public sphere from a different angle, stretching the possibilities of such a sphere, and thus offering fresh perspectives to current debates.

The second contribution this research makes is by not only discussing the power relations between individuals and Chinese authorities through the sphere, but also power relations among different participants in this sphere,

an important theme since it has a significant impact on political communications online. In so doing, it explores the extent to which, debates are facilitated to enable equal and inclusive participation, a relatively neglected aspect of studies around the online political communications in China.

This research will contribute to the debate by interrogating such power relations according to Habermas's *equality* and *principal inclusiveness* institutional criteria, namely whether pre-existing statuses have been disregarded, so the accessibility to the sphere and rights to express all sorts of concerns are inclusively given to all participants or not. The research challenges the assumption that all net-users in China come together as a 'public' with consensual opinions and uses the online public sphere to communicate with the authority through consensual opinions. It also challenges the over-generalised conceptualisation that online political communications are always anonymous and thus dis-regard all pre-existing status. Those assumptions are not entirely wrong, but they give a limited account.

This research argues although there are circumstances when consensual public opinions are reached between net-users to communicate with public authority through the Internet in China; there are also circumstances when debates are occurring between different participants, and such debate can be contentious rather than consensual. Both types of communications are given attentions in this research. This research also finds that an increasingly important phenomenon in online political communication in China is the emergence of the Sina Microblog, which has become the most used interactive site in China, and which introduced a VIP system to enable social and political elites to announce their pre-existing status in online platforms. Thus, within Sina, the status of participants in political communications are visible and net-users are labelled by and debate with different statuses. This

research investigates the potential impact of this visibility on the power relations among individuals, when they are debating in Sina, on the basis that it is important to critically evaluate this potential impact rather than ignoring it.

The third contribution this research makes is to engage with the linguistics dimension of political communication. In current academic debates, much attention has been paid to what kind of topics are debated through the sphere, while little research is carried out to examine what kind of language and debating patterns are used. In other words, scholars have analysed public debates in terms of the kind of concerns that are voiced and the outcomes of these debates but have paid less attention to the process of the debates, in terms debate patterns and language used by individuals. This does not mean that there is no academic interest at all in online language usage. On the contrary, many studies of the public sphere in non-Chinese contexts have adopted a linguistic approach. Studies have investigated the impacts and functions of different linguistic choices in the public sphere, and the social and political constructions of discourses in the sphere (for example: Lazar, 2008 and Wodak, 2008). More recently, scholars have begun to use a similar approach in studying China's online public sphere. For example, in her studies of *e gao* (online spoofs), Meng (2011:43-46) has discussed how rhetoric or even ironic expressions, such as 'Grass Mud Horse', have been used by Chinese net-users in political discussions and what the impact of using such expressions might be. Xu's (2012) study identifies six discourse genres in China's online public sphere and discusses their impact for online communications. However, these studies are exceptions and there is a need for more linguistic analyse of this type.

Starting from Habermas's conceptualisation of rational-critical debates in the structures of the *problematization of unquestioned areas* and for the *expressional function* in China's context, this research contributes to

knowledge about online language usage by asking whether public debates in China's online public sphere are being conducted through rational-critical debates or not. If not, it asks what are the linguistic choices in this sphere, how could different choices impact on China's online public sphere and individuals' political communication within it, and how might the government react to individuals' use of language. With these questions, this research addresses the language dimension of China's online public sphere, alongside the content of political communications. By finding out more not only about what individuals are debating about, but also how they are debating, the research contributes to widening and enriching the knowledge about China's online public sphere.

Methodology and Organisations of this Thesis

To answer the research question, this thesis applies an analytic framework which consists of three institutional criteria and two political functions to the online public sphere in China. This framework requires the examination of the power relations among different participants in this sphere, the language used in debates, and the power relations and interactions between individuals and the public authorities. The analyse is complex since it deals with different players involved in political communication, including the platforms that facilitate online debate, the net-users who express their opinions, and the governments who are problematized and engaged by the net-users. To do this, three case studies were carried out in two of the most popular online platforms in China: Sina Microblog and Tianya BBS. Case study is used because it provides specific illustrations of samples to closely look into the players, the relations and interactions involved in the communications, rather than simply generating generalisations.

The two platforms that are the focus and context of analysis in this research are Sina Microblog and Tianya BBS. These two sites are the most used online

debate platforms, where Chinese individuals gather, express and exchange their opinions around different political issues and current affairs. Because of their popularity, they are places where large numbers of original online political communications take place. This research then selects three cases that occurred on these two sites. The first case is a series of debates on Sina Microblog around an oil refining industrial plant in Kunming, Yunnan. The second case is a thread on Tinaya BBS, on the topic of the ‘purchase plan incident’ of Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands between China and Japan. The third case is a series of debates that occurred on a popular writer A’s Sina micro-blog², in which participants were competing their opinions about the social and political systems between the US and in China. The microblog post, comments and retweets, and BBS posts are the primary research data this research collected and analysed.

To complement the analysis, this research also examined government regulations, and collected a variety of reports and articles generated by the party media with regards to the three cases, including mass and, more particularly, new media. The regulation it studies is the National People’s Congress Standing Committee’s Decision on Safeguarding of Internet Security (2001) on Control and Dealing with Sensitive Information, a landmark piece that defines controlling of online political communication in China. The first party medium used in study is the most central party newspaper in China: People’s Daily and its website. Two local party media, Yunnan Daily and Kunming Daily, are particularly analysed regarding to the debates about the local oil refining industry plant. Kunming Mayor’s Sina Microblog account, the first mayor in China to open a microblog account, is also analysed regarding Kunming oil-refining industrial plan. And the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC)’s website, a governmental body with specific responsibilities for information and public debate online, is

² For ethical considerations, all users IDs in this thesis will be anonymous.

analysed to find out government's attitude towards linguistic choices in online political communications. A more specific reviews of why each of the platforms, events and party media were selected will be given in the Chapter 3, the methodology chapter.

When it comes to examination of the cases, the primary data source are texts: texts used to write the regulations of online platforms; texts written by the net-users to express their opinions; texts offered by the government (including the party media), to regulate, engage with and respond to the online debates. Content and discourse analysis were applied to these because both tools are specifically designed for textual analysis. Through the use of key codes, content analysis helps this research to identify what was said by net-users in the communications, and what responses came from the public authorities. So the occurrences of the expressions and responses can be located and studied. Through critical discourse analysis, a more specific and detailed analysis was carried out in terms of how things were said and what power relations were embodied in the discourses. Through discourses analysis, it is also possible to understand what languages have been used in debates, to create what effects for both net-users and the government. By combining content and discourse analysis, this research not only analyses *what* are said by the net-users and the government, but also analyses *how* things are said. Thus a more comprehensive understanding towards the online public sphere can be formed.

By using this combination, Sina Microblog and Tianya BBS are firstly analysed in terms of how they define the accessibility to their websites, and the rights to express opinions. This will contribute to the research's aim of understanding the power relations among different participants in the online public sphere, as conceptualised through *equality* and *principal inclusiveness*. This research also examines how individuals themselves speak about the power relations among all participants of the debates, and what this might

mean with regards to the structure of the *equality* and *principal inclusiveness* institutional criteria of the online public sphere.

The research then analyses contents and discourses in microblog post, comments and retweets, and BBS posts, to find out how net-users problematize the Chinese public authorities when discussing political issues, in the debates. It firstly identifies the occurrences of the key code ‘government (政府)/party (党)’ in online contents, and then analyses how this code is differently associated with different topics and events. This key code is identified because how Chinese net-users problematize the Chinese government is one of the most crucial themes in the debates around the online public sphere in China, and this research also engages with such a theme through the analytic lens of *problematization of unquestioned areas* institutional criterion and *expressional function* of the public sphere theory. By identifying this key code, this research discusses how often individuals mention the government, and how they portray the role of government. This provides a way into a discussion about how public concerns are problematized through the online public sphere, and how the sphere is used to express concerns. The methodology chapter will describe in more detail how the codes were identified and how the data was then coded. The language used in articulating political concerns is analysed by focusing on how online linguistic violence is used by individuals, what functions they serve and how they might contribute to the structure of the *problematization of unquestioned areas* and *expressional function* of this sphere.

This research also analyses the regulations at the national level and on individual websites with regards to online communications, in terms of how they define the power to monitor, control and censor online debate. This contributes to an evaluation of censorship as a crucial form of action the Chinese public authorities undertake. This research analyses how discourse is used to phrase those regulations of control at the national level and on the

two websites. This draws a context when analysing the government behaviour through the analytic lens of *corresponding political function* of the sphere. Using the same analytic lens, articles published in the party media are analysed to identify government engagements to online debates. Of the three case studies, only the oil refining plant case in Kunming involved immediate and direct reactions from the authorities. By focusing on Kunming's case, insights are provided into how central and local party media react to public concerns raised in online political communications.

The research looks at how the government engages with and responds to public concern as articulated in the popular usage of online linguistic violence. The CAC websites are analysed to identify the public authority's attitudes towards 'language usage (用语)' in online debate, in order to find out whether or not the government has started to pay attention to this phenomenon. The 2015 People's Daily Survey Report of Vulgar Use of Language on the Internet (网络低俗语言调查报告) as the first official paper to discuss online linguistic violence is also analysed to identify how discourses are used in the report to express what types of opinions.

This thesis consists of six chapters and a concluding chapter.

Chapter One: this first literature chapter reviews classical public sphere theory, the debates and critiques that surround it, and the online public sphere beyond China's context. It will also explain how this research derives its theoretical approach, in terms of examining the structures of the sphere through its institutional criteria and political functions, from public sphere theory.

Chapter Two: this second literature chapter reviews the debates around online political communications and the online public sphere in China. It discusses the media system in China, the role of the Internet within this

system, the main players in online political communications, and the issue of censorship and the digital divide. It continues to review the different arguments around the concept of an online public sphere in China, and discusses why and how this research's theoretical approach can be applied to study the online public sphere in China. In particular, it discusses the contentious characters of the online political communications, and identifies three major types of contentious public debates in China's online discussions, and discusses how these three types can be applied in the methodological design for empirical research.

Chapter Three: Methodology. This chapter describes the methods used in this research to study the structure of China's online public sphere. It explains why particular online platforms, cases and media were selected for this research. It provides a justification for the use of content and discourse analysis as the most suitable method, and how the combination of these two analytic tools were applied to the empirical studies.

Chapter Four: the focus of this chapter is on two institutional criteria: *equality* and *principal inclusiveness*. These two criteria are used to discuss what kind of power relations characterise online political communications in China. To access those power relations, this chapter examines whether accessibility to online debate platforms are equal and principally inclusive, and whether pre-existing social and political status are disregarded in debate to enable all individuals, regardless of their pre-existing status, to participate in the debate.

Chapter Five: this chapter focuses on the *problematization of unquestioned areas* institutional criterion and *expressional political function*, in terms of individuals' expressions of concern in the public realm. This chapter discusses whether individuals can self-determine the meanings of their political concerns in the public domain, in terms of how they express and debate their opinions about the Chinese political system, how they

problematize governmental policies and the authority's role in dealing with international issues. It also discusses how linguistic violence, as a popular linguistic choice, contributes to the problematization of unquestioned areas, and expressions of concern.

Chapter Six: this chapter discusses the *corresponding political function* of the online public sphere in China, in terms of the public authority's engagement with and response to the concerns that have emerged in online debates. It begins by analysing how the authority defines control and censorship through regulation. This provides a context for further analysis which asks whether and how the government, including the party media that speaks on its behalf, engages and responds to public concerns and the phenomenon of linguistic violence in online political communication.

Discussion and Conclusion: the final chapter provides a summary of the whole thesis, bringing together the data and analyses discussed in previous chapters, to suggest how the structure of China's online public sphere has been suggested and analysed throughout the research. It will also compare the empirical findings with other academic work, highlights the contributions, and suggest further research using the theoretical framework and analytic lenses generated by this research.

Chapter 1. Literature Review: Public Sphere and the Online Public Sphere

Introduction

This chapter will discuss the theoretical origins of this research: the public sphere theory. It will review Habermas's discussions around the public sphere, major debates and criticisms of the concept, and the debates around the idea of an online public sphere beyond China's context.

1.1 The Public Sphere Theory: Concepts and Debates

Public sphere theory is primarily associated with J. Habermas's work. He defines the public sphere as a critical sphere in which 'private people come together as a public... against public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relation' (Habermas, 1989: 27). This interpretation of the public sphere as an arena to facilitate political communications for individuals to engage in and challenge the public authority, namely governments of the country, is firstly abstracted by Habermas as a historical category. Central to this historical category is the transformation of European bourgeois societies over centuries, a transformation which saw the institutions of the public sphere changing from the 'world of letters', such as books, journal critics, to coffee houses, salons and table societies in various European countries, and then going into decline in the mass media era (Habermas, 1989: 30, 160-162). For Habermas, the public sphere provides a critical theory for the modern mass media system. By reviewing the historical category of the public sphere, Habermas states that in the mass media era, 'the world of letters was replaced by the pseudo-public or sham-private world of culture consumption' (Habermas, 1989:160).

The exchange of information went into a circle of production and consumption, and 'discussions, now a business becomes formalized' (Habermas, 1989:164).

Habermas's concept of public sphere entered academic debates which then went beyond his historical category and criticism of contemporary political communication via the mass media. The notion of the public sphere is frequently used, when referring to political communication between the public and the government; and the public sphere theory has been widely applied by academics to critically examine those communications. As Garnham (2007: 206) suggests, the attraction of the public sphere theory 'was that it offered the possibility of a concrete historically situated sociological analysis...of the relation between the material, economic reality of media systems, and the public debate, formation of public opinion and influence on public policy...'. Goode (2005:1) suggests that the concept of the public sphere is 'routinely invoked in debates around democracy, citizenship and communication'. The kind of 'routinely' occurring debates around the public sphere not only critically reflect on Habermas' version of a bourgeois public sphere, but more crucially, underline the very idea of the public sphere as a communicative space between the public and the public authority, then critically applies and develops public sphere theory as a theoretical framework within which to examine, assess and criticise the political communications between the two sides. Because of those applications and debates, the public sphere theory is often used outside the historical category, and has become one of the most commonly applied normative framework in the analysis of political communications between the public and the government in different countries, and of interactions among the public, the government, and different types of media. Thus, when the notion of the public sphere is used, it is a concept and framework that has developed from but not limited to Habermas's interpretation of the public sphere. When engaging in

academic debates around the public sphere, is necessary to firstly understand how Habermas talks about it, and then critically assess and develop his interpretations, in order to better apply it to the examination of contemporary political communications.

1.1.1 Public Sphere Theory: Institutional Criteria and Political Functions

Habermas interprets the bourgeois public sphere as a ‘tension-charged field’ (Habermas, 1989: 29) between the public and the government. Such a field, ideally should serve ‘political functions’ (ibid), and such functions include *expressional political function* as private individuals form a public, use reason to express and exchange views on political issues, and raise public concern; and then the *corresponding political function*, as the government engages with and responds to such issues and concerns, in order to best serve and correspond to its people’s needs. As he has stated, the public authority ‘owes this attribute to its tasks of promoting the public or common welfare of its rightful members’ (Habermas, 1989:2); while ‘[T]he public sphere as a functional element in the political realm was given the normative status of an organ for the self-articulation of civil society with a state authority corresponding’ (Habermas 1989: 74).

Such a field can be realised through institutions, examples being the ‘world of letters’, such as books, journals critics, to coffee houses, salons and table societies in various European countries (Habermas 1989:30). Those illustrations bring in conceptualisations of three institutional criteria, which, he argues, all these historical institutions share: *equality*, the ability to achieve the *problematization of unquestioned areas*, and *principal inclusiveness* (Habermas, 1989: 36-37). *Equality* is defined as the dis-regarding of pre-existing social and political status, to ‘eradicate differences and inequalities’ (Habermas, 1989: 36). In this process, pre-existing social and political status

can no longer bring in their select groups of individuals, such as social and political elites, with more access to political communications. Nor can they bring in pre-determined positions, which allow selected groups of individuals to dominate the communications. Instead, it is the general public, rather than selected groups of already powerful individuals, that can engage in debates through the public sphere. *Problematization of unquestioned areas*, refers to instances in which the public uses reasons to define (or redefine) meanings of public concern so that the meanings of those concerns no longer remain 'components' of the public authority's representation, but become areas in which private people can 'determine its meaning on their own' (Habermas, 1989: 36). In this process, individuals critically define and rationally communicate about what they need and think, as different from the government defining what is needed, and forcing such definitions onto the public. So political communication through the public sphere can critically reflect the public's self-determined opinions. *Principally inclusive* means that the public sphere is 'open to all', who are 'able to' use this sphere, in debate (Habermas, 1989: 37). This criterion ensures that the institutionalisation of the online public sphere offers participation to all rightful members of society, with all types of political concerns and issues. This ensures that chances to express opinions are given to all individuals in the public domain, around all possible concerns, with no-predetermined significance offered to certain groups or certain opinions. But Habermas also suggests that such inclusiveness should be understood as a 'principle', in that ways the public sphere is open to privates who are able to access and use it, namely the 'educated' and 'propertied' (ibid), so that they can read, listen, and communicate in this sphere. He concludes that *principally inclusive* means that to communicate through the public sphere, people are not judged by who they are, and concerns are not judged with pre-determined significance, but rather, based on accessibility. Once people gain accessibility, they are included in the public sphere.

It is crucial to understand and interpret the public sphere in terms of its political functions and three institutional criteria; not only because they are put forward by Habermas as key approaches to understand the institutions and functions of the public sphere, but also because they provide analytic lenses for public sphere theory.

To explain this: Habermas's narrative of the public sphere relies critically on his historical reviews of how political communications have been engaged with in European societies during the 17th to 18th centuries. The public sphere as a historical category provides crucial and original sources for its conceptualisation. But if one focuses only on the historical aspect of the public sphere, discussion around it would largely remain for the past but not the present. What has enabled academics to apply the public sphere theory beyond the historical category, and provide a normative framework within which to assess public-government relations in the contemporary world are the three institutional criteria and two political functions abstracted from the historical reviews. These three criteria and two functions are not limited by historical context, and can be regarded as analytic lenses with which public sphere theory sets out to assess political communications. They indicate that the power relations between the individuals, who are debating through the sphere need to be analysed to see whether they are equal and inclusive. They also indicate that the power relations between the government and the public need to be examined to see whether individuals can critically and rationally express self-determined opinions on political concerns, and whether or not the public authority will engage correspondingly. Those power relations and interactions are important historically and are equally significant for analysing contemporary political communications. Thus, through these criteria and functions, academics have a set of systematic analytic tools with which to study, understand and interpret how political communications are

established in a society, through discussions of the institutionalisation and functions of the public sphere.

1.1.2 Criticism and Debate of the Public Sphere Theory

Habermas's definition of the public sphere as consisting of three institutional criteria and two political functions provides the basis for the application of the theory as a normative framework beyond the historical context. It allows the critical assessment of contemporary political communications between the state, the public, and the media. Nonetheless it is a foundation that academics have not simply adopted uncritically. Instead, critical debates and critiques of the concept itself, especially as it is used in Habermas's original work, have also developed.

This section engages with those debates and critiques from three key aspects, not in an attempt to totally abolish the concept of the public sphere but because the public sphere theory has the potential to study key power relations in contemporary political communications. It is therefore necessary to be critical in applying it, rather than blindly following Habermas. These three aspects are discussed to indicate that, when the public sphere theory is applied as a normative framework, Habermas's version of the bourgeois public sphere has its limitations, and it is important to understand and deal with those limitations in order to better apply the framework.

The three debates engaged here are the three most debated ones around the public sphere theory. The first debate draws on a general question, which is whether or not there is only one public sphere. This question is fundamental because it enables the debate to go beyond Habermas's version of the bourgeois public sphere, and contemplate the possibility of multiple public spheres. These multiple public spheres can be contributed by historical narratives that are different from Habermas's, but more crucially means the

applications of the public sphere theory also need to be multiple, so as to be applicable not only to democratic nations, but also non-democratic ones. The second debates are around the equality and inclusiveness in Habermas' conceptualisations. While the third debate is around the rationality of the public sphere. Both these two debates are specific, as they explicitly refer to the institutional criteria and political functions of the public sphere. They are debated to indicate that although those criteria and functions are crucial analytic lenses in the public sphere theory, Habermas's interpretations on equality, inclusiveness and on language usages are limited. In the application of the public sphere theory, it is necessary to understand the limitations in his theory and broaden the perception of them.

1.1.2.1 Debates about Multiple Public Spheres

Habermas suggests that the public sphere is a European bourgeois one. Such a suggestion is made because Habermas's historical narrative of the sphere relies primarily on Enlightenment thinkers, which leads to his idealistic version of the public sphere as a model of public sphere based on the history of Enlightenment in European bourgeois societies. Calhoun (1996:33) argues that such a limited account of intellectual history, i. e. only taking European Enlightenment thinkers seriously, is the central weakness in Habermas's methodology and conceptualisation of the public sphere. Such a central weakness means intellectual thinkers and histories that are outside the Enlightenment are excluded from Habermas's public sphere.

As a widely used normative framework, this central weakness is highly problematic, especially for scholars who see multiplicities in the historical narratives and the public, and encounter multiplicities of nations and societies. These scholars debate about the possibilities to talk about not only the bourgeois public sphere, but rather multiple public spheres, as better empirical applications of the public sphere theory, to address the increasing

dynamics and varieties of political communication in the contemporary world. The debate around multiple public spheres has led to a critical understanding predicated not on a single public sphere in one type of society, but rather, multiple public spheres within democratic societies as well as in non-democratic ones.

The possibilities and necessity to envisage multiple public spheres beyond Habermas's bourgeois version is most in evidence in Negt and Kluge's study. Departing from Habermas's definition, they suggest that other than talking about a bourgeois public sphere, it is also necessary to recognise the 'proletarian public sphere', as a 'historical counterconcept' (Negt and Kluge, 1993: 57). By focusing on the historical and present experiences of working classes, they suggest that 'in a bourgeois class, the interests of individuals are organized and implemented on both private and public forms. By contrast, the interests of workers can, since they are unrealized, be organized only if they enter into a context of living, in other words into a proletarian public sphere, only then do they have the chance to develop as interests, instead of remaining mere possibilities' (ibid). The establishment of this counterconcept is powerful and necessary because it demonstrates that if a historical narrative is based on Marxist class struggles, then the historical category of the public sphere would be a proletarian one, used by the working class to express and fight for their interests and expressions. If only the bourgeois public sphere was counted, working class individuals would feel outside such a sphere, because the 'expressing use-values' of such a sphere 'are determined by the bourgeoisie' (Negt and Kluge, 1993: 56). Thus it is necessary to recognise not only the bourgeois public sphere, but also the proletarian one, as well as other historical narratives that are not included by Habermas.

To acknowledge that there are outsiders in Habermas's narrative is not to deny the value of the bourgeois public sphere, but rather to open up the application of the concept of the public sphere. On this, Fraser says 'the idea of a public

sphere as an arena of collective self-determination does not sit well with approaches that would appeal to an outsider perspective to delimit its proper boundaries' (Fraser, 1993:19). Habermas' s bourgeois public sphere would not appeal to proletariats, but at the same time, the proletarian one would not appeal to all individuals in the society either, since there is no guarantee that all individuals' interests would be reflected through a single public sphere. Thus, rather than speaking of a single public sphere, a 'multiplicity of publics is preferable' (Fraser, 1993: 27). To explain this multiplicity, Wright (2008, 33) says that for Fraser, 'a diverse range of (subaltern counter) public spheres are beneficial to democracy'. Rather than talking about a single public sphere that appeals to everyone, it would be better to talk about 'diverse, multi-sectoral public spheres' (ibid).

These multiple public spheres can operate on many levels, from local, to national, and then to international (Wright, 2008: 33, Curran, 2000: 136-137); they can also be issue-specific, such as only concerned with human rights or environmental issues (Curran, 2000:136); and can also be gender-specific, i.e. primarily focusing on feministic rights, or concerns about minor sexualities (Fraser, 1993: 19-20). By seeing the public sphere concept as multiple, political communications caused by different interests and in different societies can be encountered and assessed through the public sphere framework.

The possibilities of talking about multiple public spheres are of particular benefit to scholars who intend to apply the public sphere theory as a normative framework to analyse political communications in non-European countries, or non-democratic societies. Liu and McCormick argue that 'there could be many different types of public spheres', among them, for Habermas the 'liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere,' is relatively close to the ideal type' (Liu and McCormick, 2011: 112-113). But having an ideal model for Habermas, does not stop other people, with different historical observations

and empirical standpoints, to discuss other public spheres. Indeed, scholars who are interested in political communications in non-western and non-democratic nations, have applied the public sphere theory, as an analytic framework to study the interactions among the public, the government and the media in those nations. Sreberny-Mohammadi (1998), for example, critically applies the public sphere theory to understand the relations between the commercialization of broadcasting and the development of civil society in the Middle East. Akinbobola (2015) critically reviews the public sphere theory within an African context, and suggests the possible conceptualisation of a digital public sphere in West Africa. Thomas (2014) and Harindranath (2014) have both placed the public sphere theory within an Indian context. Thomas (2015: 133-134) specifically argues that the 'very contextual interpretations' of the public sphere theory 'are far removed from the notion of the bourgeois public sphere that is ascribed to Habermas', but rather 'are bound to emerge from a variety of contexts as the result of a variety of communicative and cultural shapings'. This means it is limiting to regard the public sphere as only applicable to European bourgeois society. The application of the framework is being enhanced and developed by embracing multiplicities in cultures, nations and communications.

Among these applications, a number of academics have conceptualised the Chinese public sphere. Liu and McCormick (2011: 115), for example, state that the public sphere theory can be empirically applied to China's context, which they define as 'a social realm where public discourses are structurally situated, allocated, regulated, and circulated'; it can act as a 'theoretical ground for critically assessing media reform and the transformation of the Chinese public sphere in relation to democratic politics'. Liu and McCormick's study is only one example among many applications and debates around the public sphere in China. These applications and debates will be reviewed in depth in the next chapter.

Debates around multiple public sphere address the central weakness in Habermas's version of the public sphere thereby widening its scope and allowing this western theory to be applied to political communications that are beyond one historical and political narrative. The significance of this debate also means that in empirical studies, the specific historical and social context of Habermas's European bourgeois public sphere has been disregarded, but the normative framework of the concept of the public sphere has been kept, which makes it possible to use the idea of the public sphere, or public spheres to understand and study political communications within different contexts. As part of widening its application, scholars have also started to discuss exactly how the normative framework of the public sphere can be better interpreted and these discussions tend to focus on the institutional criteria and political functions of the public sphere as crucial analytic lenses of the public sphere framework. In these debates, critiques on equality and inclusivity in the conceptualisation and application of the *equality* and *principally inclusive* institutional criteria, and the consensus-seeking rational discourses in the conceptualisation and applications of the *problematization of unquestioned areas* institutional criterion and the *expressional political function*, are the most debated.

1.1.2.2 Debates about Equality and Inclusiveness

With applications of the public sphere theory going beyond Habermas's bourgeois public sphere, to become a normative framework for analysing political communications, it is important that this framework is critically defined. As part of this process, a debate has developed around the two institutional criteria of the public sphere: *equality* and *principally inclusive*. Central to this debate is not to deny the importance of *equality* and *principal inclusiveness* as the key analytic lenses in the public sphere framework and as indispensable criteria for political communications; but rather, to reinforce

their importance whilst suggesting that Habermas's account of equality and inclusiveness is limited. By having this debate, scholars have demonstrated that equality and inclusiveness among different participants in political communications are complicated issues. When the *equality* and *principal inclusiveness* criteria are referred to or applied, rather than accepting Habermas's interpretation of these terms as the only explanation, it is necessary to see the limitations of his definitions, and open them up to critical reflection.

Habermas's interpretation of equality and inclusiveness in the European bourgeois public sphere is first and foremost criticised by feminists who see exclusions and inequality in his interpretation. When Habermas introducing *equality*, he writes '*[L]es hommes*, private gentlemen, made up the public' (Habermas, 1989:36), and it was such a 'public' that should enjoy the equal and inclusive right to enter into the bourgeois public sphere, and also should be entitled equal rights to express and debate in such a sphere. Feminist Lande (1988: 7) points out that it is an interpretation that is neither equal nor inclusive, since it is clearly gendered, with women excluded from the bourgeois public sphere. Such a gendered public sphere belongs to a particular historical period (17th and 18th century Europe), which Habermas uses to construct his ideal version of a bourgeois public sphere, a period with strong gendered characteristics. Historically, women and women's concerns, were regarded as belonging to the private sphere, namely inside the family and the household, and 'domestic privacy' (Fraser, 1993: 20) was not to be discussed in the public sphere. This is in stark contrast to bourgeois men of the time who could enter the public domain outside the privacy of their families, and debate in the public sphere about political matters (see also, Bruell, Monika and Siim, 2012: 36). A private and public division was not the only means by which women were excluded; the idea of rationality in the public sphere, was also established to prevent women's participation.

Knoppers suggests that ‘the very definition of rational discourse and of citizens debating in public presupposed the exclusion of women’ (Knoppers, 2014: 616). In other words, a bourgeois public sphere in which rational debate took place was assumed to be only for men, since only men were believed to be rational beings, while women were labelled as lacking these characteristics. On this basis, it was thought they should be excluded from a rational public sphere. Cowan indicates that ‘gender was not the only means by which access to the coffeehouse public sphere was restricted’, but rather that ‘social class, regional, professional or political affiliations’ (Cowan, 2001: 149-150) were all means by which individuals could be excluded.

These criticisms show that historical institutions in the bourgeois public sphere did not share the criteria of equality and principally inclusive, but Habermas fails to reflect these inequalities and exclusions. The importance of the criticisms is that they demonstrate equality and inclusiveness could and need to go beyond Habermas’s model, to seek equality and inclusiveness not only among the ‘private gentlemen’ of European societies, but also more widely among different genders, sexual orientations, races, social classes, and all identities and status in any political and social context. A fully equal and inclusive public sphere may always be a utopian concept, but this does not prevent individuals with all types of identities from seeking a more equal and inclusive sphere than the one limited to the ‘private gentlemen’, and in which to express a wide range of concerns.

It also enables the development of the public sphere theory as a normative framework. When such a framework is applied to the analysis of political communications, *equality* and *principally inclusive* are still important analytic lenses. Habermas’s intention to establish equality and inclusiveness as institutional criteria of the public sphere should always be admitted, because he critically demonstrates that the power relations between different individuals with all sorts of status are crucial aspects when assessing political

communications. At the same time, his critics have reflected on these aspects and enabled these institutional criteria to be interpreted in such a way as to move beyond Habermas's limited historical account. They show that in discussion of equality and inclusiveness, researchers can and need to see more widely, in order to better account for power relations among individuals with different status.

1.1.2.3 Debate about Consensus-seeking Rational Discourses

Beside critical reflections on the criteria of *equality* and *principally inclusive*, the consensus-seeking rational-critical debates promoted by Habermas are also the subject of considerable debate, whose purpose is also to suggest a better interpretation of the public sphere framework in order to enhance its application when analysing contemporary political communications. A central dispute around this issue is Habermas's firm belief in the position of consensus-seeking rational discourse in the public sphere, in contrast to post-modernists who argue for the recognition of contentions and non-rational discourses in the public sphere. Such a debate is significant for the application of public sphere theory, since it firstly demonstrates that consensus-seeking is not the only legitimated purpose for political communications and affirms the value of contentious debate among people with different interests and identities. The public sphere theory framework should not be limited to valuing consensus-seeking debate, but should encompass contentious debate. Secondly, this debate also highlights language usage as a key aspect in the public sphere. This is because when interpreting Habermas's conceptualisation of rational discourses, scholars demonstrate that language is the communicative instrument that allows rational discourses to be organised and expressed. But they also indicate that as an instrument, languages can be used in different ways for different purposes, while rational discourse is one among many. Rather than seeing rational discourse as the

only valued choice thus only study it, it is necessary to recognise the diversities in languages and study how languages are used differently for individuals to express their concerns.

The central position of consensus-seeking rational discourses has been repeatedly stressed by Habermas throughout his writing. He suggests that 'public debate was supposed to transform voluntas into a ratio that in the public competition of private arguments came into being as the consensus about what was practically necessary in the interest of all' (Habermas, 1989:83). In his version of public sphere theory, Habermas posits two founding blocks: one is consensus-seeking as the ultimate purpose for communications in the public sphere; the other is rational discourse as the means through which communications are conducted. These two founding blocks can be seen in his interpretation of the *problematization of unquestioned areas* criterion and the *expressional political function*. Rational discourse forms consensus-seeking rational-critical debates through which individuals use reason to self-determine meanings of public concerns. The articulations and exchange of rational discourses lead the public to reach the most reasonable opinions of the public concerns, and they present such opinions as the consensual public opinions to communicate with the authorities. By having these two founding blocks, Habermas establishes a sense that using rational discourse in debates is universally appealing and achievable; through this usage, individuals can and would gradually achieve consensus around all sorts of public matters, and agree on what is most necessary to be expressed as the public concern for all.

Habermas's firm belief in consensus-seeking rational discourses is heavily criticized, which as Thomassen (2008:11) puts it, could be the 'most heavily criticized elements of Habermas's work'. Critics challenge such elements by particularly focusing on the possible contentions and diversities in individuals' linguistic choices and political interests. To understand these critiques, it is

necessary to firstly interpret what is meant by consensus-seeking rational discourses.

Consensus-seeking rational discourse in public sphere theory should not be equal to rational logic or rationality in individuals' minds, although rational thoughts are the foundation of rational discourse (Thompson, 1982: 122-125, Steuerman, 2000: 25-27, Brandom 2001: 25, 158, 189, 191-193, 195-196, Bunge, 1987: 5, 8). Instead, it should be understood as a process that begins with individuals' rational thoughts on political matters within their own logical minds, and such minds are extended to the outer world through their languages, since language is the 'extension' of people's mind (McLuhan, 2008: 63, 85, 89, 93, 95, 282). More specifically, it refers to a process in which individuals wanting to express their opinions rely on a linguistic choice that aims to produce a particular type of discourse (rational), and to achieve a particular purpose (consensus). In this process, language becomes a communicative 'instrument' that rational discourses can be drawn on (Olson, 2013: 432-433, 437, Olson, 2012:153) while consensus through rational discourse becomes the communicative goal. When this instrument is used for consensus-seeking rational-critical debates, it means individual are expressing their opinions by explaining reasons behind, so reasons and opinions are expressed together, to demonstrate not only what individuals are thinking about but also why. While others reading or listening to these opinions through rational understanding of the reasons, and then reply to them in the same way. Through this process, reasons are articulated and exchanged to reach the most reasonable opinions, and then such opinions are presented as the consensual public opinions to communicate with the government on behalf of the collective private individuals.

When approaching consensus-seeking rational discourse, what becomes problematic is not that language is the communicative instrument for expressing opinions in the public sphere (Wright, 2008: 21, Thomassen,

2008:17), but rather that consensus-seeking rational discourse should only be seen as one particular process among many, through which language can be used; and yet Habermas defines it as the only valued process in his public sphere. This definition ignores the multiple levels of differences and diversities of individuals within society (Calhoun, 1993: 274), and those differences and diversities are not only in individuals' political interests, but also in their choice of language. Villa, with reference to Lyotard and Rorty, argues that by suggesting the public sphere is structured upon consensus-seeking rational discourses, Habermas intends to 'avoid an irreversible fragmentation of the public sphere' (Villa, 1992: 715-716). By assuming one type of linguistic choice with one purpose, a hegemonic position is created in this sphere and the pre-assumption is made towards a possibility that an 'agreement on which rules or metaprescriptions are universally valid', which is actually against the nature of 'diversity of discursive species' (ibid). To posit consensus-seeking rational discourse for the public sphere is to set up a universal standard; but in nature, human beings make different choices, and the conflicts and diversities among people should not be neglected. To neglect such diversity and difference and to assume that an agreement on language and a consensus in political concerns can be reached, is to give consensus-seeking rational discourse a hegemonic or even dominant position in which this type of practice and those who adopt it, are offered a privileged position in political debate compared to those who do not or cannot practice language in this way.

The danger of overly reinforcing consensus-seeking rational-critical debates, as Steuerman argues, is that the public sphere 'might be playing into the hands of a totalitarian and repressive society' wishing to silence all forms of dissent, and '[T]he right to disagree and be different becomes secondary' (Steuerman, 2000: 26). Thus, the function of the public sphere, as an independent and critical communicative space can be weakened. Even in a non-totalitarian and

repressive society, the assumed agreements on language and consensus of opinion can still be used by dominating groups as an excuse to exclude other groups, and thus lead to inequality and exclusiveness of the public sphere. The example of such an exclusion is that consensus-seeking rational discourses have been historically associated with well-educated/paid, 'white, property-owning males' (Kellner, 2000: 267), and have been used to exclude women and the working class from the public sphere, by claiming they do not have the rational quality (Goode, 2005: 31). Dahlberg also argues that in any given society there will always be mainstream and major discourses, and those who are outside of the mainstream. Major discourses can achieve more power to reinforce their identity, cultures and social concerns, by establishing an 'authoritative status' in discourse. So regarding rational discourse as the defined discourse for the public sphere is one way that authoritative status is established, which leads to 'subordinate discourses', including the cultures, groups and identities associated with them, being 'marginalized or even silenced' from the public sphere (Dahlberg, 2007a: 835-836).

Consensus-seeking rational discourses do have their values, but it should not be established as a universally achievable process nor as more valued in the public sphere. Instead, it is necessary to realise and admit the existence of differences of public opinion, and of language practices, and to understand their conflicts and dissents, rather than seeking a hegemonic position. Because the greatest political function of the public sphere is to allow all rightful members of a society, with all sorts of choices and interests, to express and debate all sorts of concerns in public accessible arenas; so public authorities can be informed and respond to their different needs. If this public sphere is based upon exclusion through applying uncritical beliefs about consensus-seeking rational discourse, rather than enabling contentions to be spoken in self-determined ways by different social groups, then the public sphere becomes very limited. So as Mouffe (1989: 34, 1998: 1) suggests, there

is a necessity to recognise the conflicted nature of political communication and to 'takes account of the full breadth and specificity of the democratic struggles in our time'. Dahlberg also argues that seeking for consensus through rational discourse is not the purpose of political debate but rather, it is contestation, because consensus can only be consensus of a dominant culture, while contestation opens up the spaces for excluded voices. Thus, rather than talking about a rational public sphere, 'discursive contestation' is needed as a 'normative requirement for advancing the public sphere' to '[E]ffective challenges' 'discursive boundaries' and to 'open up space for excluded voices, fostering greater intra-discursive contestation or deliberation' (Dahlberg, 2007a: 837).

In order to respect such differences and diversities, language usage and political opinions must be understood as consisting of self-determined choices that individuals are given the right to make. Individuals can choose to use language as an instrument to form consensus-seeking rational discourses, but they can also use language to form non-rational discourses for the purpose of discursive contestation. For example, instead of forming rational discourses to inform and discuss through reason, language can be used to form linguistic violence to attack, to offend and to humiliate (Jackman, 2002: 395-396, Andersson and Trudgill, 1990: 35-36, 63-65). Instead of seeking consensus, language can be used for the purpose of exchanging inflammatory speeches, aggression and anger (Rancer and Avtgis 2006: 3,7, 13). Those choices, although different from what Habermas would hope for in his public sphere, are still indications of individuals' self-determined choices. Their value and function should not be denied because they are different, but rather can and should be critically analysed.

Thus the focus of analysis should not be limited to consensus-seeking rational discourse, especially when applying the analytic lenses *problematization of unquestioned areas* and *expressional political functions* as analytic lenses.

Instead, the focus should be towards language usage itself because a critical analysis of language usage makes it possible to ‘deconstruct the text’ (Wright, 2008: 22) in the public sphere, to understand: what are the opinions that individuals try to generate by using certain languages; what are the concerns behind such opinions; how the opinions are generated, and how the linguistic choices have contributed to the expressions. The focus should also encompass contentious debates raised in political communication. Thus, the diversity and differences in individual political interests and linguistic choices can be identified and analysed through the public sphere framework.

To sum up, Habermas’s definition of the public sphere offers a theoretical foundation for the concept, while the debates and criticism that surround it enables this concept to be critically reviewed and advanced. In describing the departure from Habermas’s conceptualisation of the bourgeois public sphere, this section has discussed how the sphere could be more equal and inclusive than Habermas’s version, and how the sphere could better reflect concerns from different individuals. These critiques do not deny the value of the conceptualisation of the public sphere as a communicative arena but rather show that applications of the public sphere framework need to be critical, to recognise the dynamics, difference and diversities in contemporary political communication.

The three debates discussed above provide the basis for the empirical application of the public sphere concept as a normative framework to study political communication. But the actual application will vary according to the nature of each research. For this research that aims to study the online public sphere in China, the empirical theoretical framework and methodology will be based on but developed from them, through using the three institutional criteria and the two political functions as analytic lenses. This means the analytic focus is the equality and inclusiveness of power relations among

different individuals in political communications, their language usage, expressions of concerns, and governments' reactions towards them. However, the context of China will also be reviewed in order to indicate more specifically what the crucial power relations are and which aspect of language, which concerns, and government behaviours require analysis. This aspect of the research will be described more fully in the next chapter.

1.2 Online Public Spheres: Promises and Limitations

When the public sphere framework is applied to the analysis of contemporary political communication, the role of the media is central. The framework is used to discuss relations between the public, the government, and the media in political debates, to question whether or not certain types of media have contributed or restricted equal, inclusive and critical debates of public concern in the public sphere. The types of media in discussions draw on Habermas's historical examples of print media, such as books and journals to mass media, such as televisions and radio and then to the digital media, such as the Internet. This development has been in response to the transformation of the media. What has not changed is the application of the public sphere framework itself, to study issues and challenges raised by different media types for political communication.

This section will focus on different conceptualisations and interpretations of the online public sphere, because its empirical research on China's online public sphere will be part of this big approach. However, before this, a brief review of the academic debates around the relation between the mass media and the public sphere will be drawn, since these links with discussions about the online public sphere.

1.2.1 Public Sphere and the Mass Media

The mass media has a central role in Habermas's public sphere theory. Habermas acknowledges that mass media played a crucial role in political communications in the 20th century, but he regarded its role as harmful for the public sphere: 'the world of letters was replaced by the pseudo-public or sham-private world of culture consumption' (Habermas, 1989:160); in which interactive dialogues among individuals, have been transformed into mass consumption of standardised, cultural productions made by media organisations (Habermas, 1989:160-162). The exchange of information went into a circle of production and consumptions, and 'discussions, now a business becomes formalized' (Habermas, 1989:164), as he saw it, the decline of the public sphere in an era of mass media.

To call it a decline, Polan explains that for Habermas, 'the public sphere arose in reaction to the artificialities of the old aristocracy' (Polan, 1993: 38). Books, journals, coffee houses, salons and table societies, as institutions of the historical category of bourgeois public sphere, empowered the newly emerging private property-owners in the 17th and 18th centuries. Those media and spaces enabled private individuals to express their concerns, to fight against aristocracies and to engage the public authority to pay attention and respond to their needs. But, for Habermas, the spread of mass media removed this empowerment from private individuals, giving the expressive powers to the mass media organisations. Media institutions were empowered as they could represent public opinions in the public domain, while individuals became passive consumers of information and opinions produced by the mass media. Deliberatively engaged critical debates were no longer being generated in the public sphere, but rather, communications around political issues became reliant on standardised information and opinion goods selected and made by the media organisations. What public opinions should be and how such opinions should be expressed, was now determined by the mass

media. When compared with ordinary private individuals, the mass media is thus offered a dominated position in communication, and opinions produced, provided and spread by them are given pre-determined significance. This political communication through the mass media has become unequal, exclusive and uncritical.

Habermas's criticism of the mass media is important. Dahlgren suggests that Habermas's perception of the relation between the media and the public sphere should not be taken as 'ready-made answers', but rather as a 'formulation of questions' which can lead to a discussion of mass media's role in the public sphere, through both 'its potential and limitations' (Dahlgren, 1995: 25). The 'ready-make-answers' refer to Habermas sceptic views about the mass media; while the 'formulation of questions' refers to his application of public sphere theory as an analytic framework through which to study mass media. Dahlgren stresses that Habermas's analysis of the role of mass media in contemporary political communication using the public sphere framework is crucial, even though the conclusions he reached have been critically challenged. Curran, for instance, says 'a theory of media and democracy need to be related, in other words, to the collective and institutional forms of the modern political system' and Habermas's work 'represents a clever attempt to do precisely this' (Curran, 2000: 135). With a critical review of the concept of the public sphere, he argues, such a concept speaks about a framework which is a 'space within society, free of both state or corporate control, in which the media should make available information affecting the public good, and facilitate a free, open and reasoned public dialogue that guides the public direction of society' (Curran, 2000: 135). Garnham's (1993: 260) study, for example, suggests that the 'concept of the public sphere offers the soundest basis for the analysis and political action necessary to rebuild systems of both communication and representative democracy adequate to the contemporary world'. In other words, public

sphere theory allows us to question issues raised in mediated communication in relation to political debates in the contemporary democratic world, in terms of whether or not the modern mass media system ensures or threatens the ‘freedom of assembly and freedom to impart and receive information’ (Granham, 1993: 260).

For all these scholars, relations between the media, the public and the government are areas to examine, and public sphere theory provides comprehensive tools with which to do this. The answers obtained may differ but all share public sphere theory as the framework of analysis. Such applications have developed beyond the mass media to the digital media, especially the Internet, as the new technology has spread across the world.

1.2.2 The Public Sphere and the Internet

Debates around the relationship between the Internet and the public sphere, are not radically different from those that surround mass media. This is not to suggest that there are no differences between them, because by engaging with different types of media, academics encounter different organisations, representations, regulation and effects, which will lead to the need for different approaches and lead to different results. But at the same time, discussions about mass media and the Internet, do share a common theoretical framework: the normative framework of the public sphere through which relations among the media, the government, and the public are analysed. A move of focus from mass media such as the TV and radio, to the Internet, still attempts to ask same fundamental questions, although the medium has changed.

Papacharissi (2010:119) indicates that over the years, applications of the public sphere as a normative concept ‘has been broadened to address contemporary critique and approaches’, and ‘what remains to be seen is how

well, how poorly, or simply how the Internet fits' into it. In other words, examining the Internet through the concept of a public sphere is possible and indeed crucial, as a critical approach to tackle contemporary issues, namely the rapid and wide spread of the Internet, as hosting platforms for political communication. Applying the concept in this context is important, because it opens up new possibilities in the debate around the public sphere. As Bohman (2004:1330) states, new 'technological conditions' are being considered for 'modern public spheres', and this creates 'innovative potentials' (Bohman, 2004: 151), and opens up new challenges and questions. The concept of the online public sphere is thus introduced to address four central questions: whether or not the Internet, as an increasingly dominating medium in contemporary society, can potentially form an online public sphere or spheres; if so, how public debates within the online sphere are facilitated; whether or not the online public spheres can promote liberal and interactive political communication, enhance deliberative, equal and inclusive political participation; and finally, who can benefit and be empowered through this sphere. By talking about an online public sphere, a particular conceptualisation is given so that the analytic lenses of the public sphere framework can be adopted in the examination of online debates, and specifically, of online political communication, through looking at equality and inclusiveness, analysing the language used in the debates, and interactions between the public and the government.

Two characteristics that are central to understanding to the online public sphere or spheres, are de-centralisation and anonymity. Such characteristics should not be understood as determining the formation of the online public sphere, but rather as that individuals can potentially take advantage of those characteristics of online political communications to engage with liberal and deliberative political communications, and thus lead to the possible formation of an online public sphere.

The Internet is believed to be a new medium that enables de-centralised, flexible and open-architecture networking. It stores and delivers information into the network (Feather, 2008: 33, Leiner et. al, 1997 :103, Abbate, 2000 :11, Berners-Lee, 1999: 39-40, Castells, 2001: 116), so that information can be generated, presented and received through multiple channels, from and towards multiple directions (Feather, 2008: 33, Herring, 2002: 112, 114, 120). Thus this new medium has the potential to decentralise communication by distributing the rights to express and inform among all participants in the network, rather than being centrally controlled by one or a few individuals (Castells, 2001: 54, Rheingold, 1994: 2, 157). This could potentially facilitate political debate from many-to-many, which is different from the one-to-many pattern of communication through mass media. Through using the Internet, individuals may no longer be passive receivers and consumers of information produced by mass media organisations, but could actively access information on the network generated through multiple sources. Public opinions may no longer be represented by the media organisations, but could be deliberatively expressed by and exchanged between every individual on the network. This means online political communications could occur as deliberative competitions of opinions among individuals through publicly accessible virtual arenas, in which individuals can directly participate, rather than being represented.

It should be noted that the level to which such de-centralised communications can be realised will be subject to the structure of the network, the regulations of the Internet, and the inter-personal/inter-group relations in the actual communications, requiring specific case-to-case analysis. Still, the de-centralisation characteristic of the Internet offer such potentials.

Online debates are also argued to be anonymous. In other words, individuals do not need to present their real identities in debates online, but rather, can engage through online identities or anonymity (Kendall, 1998: 130, Huffaker

and Calvert, 2005, Castells, 2001: 116, Turkle, 1999: 647, Turkle, 1996: 178). This anonymity might help, in a limited way, to dis-regard the influence of pre-established social and political status, allowing individuals not to be pre-judged based on who they are, but more through their opinions. Without knowing the real identities of online participants, high and low status in the work place, gender and socio-economic differences, can be left out and net-users can enter into debates and express their opinions on an equal footing, without being limited by status. In political communication, this could encourage individuals to express opinions that they would not normally express through their real identities, and challenge political issues that they would not normally challenge (Berg, 2016: 38, Akdeniz, 2002, Farrall, 2012, Papacharissi, 2010: 122). This could potentially allow more critical problematization of political issues.

However, anonymity does not necessarily make the online space an equal and inclusive one, nor does it necessarily lead to critical debate. Individual scenarios would need to be analysed to establish this. Nonetheless, anonymity does create that possibility.

It is these two characteristics of online communication, de-centralisation and anonymity, that leads to scholars to suggest that it is possible to talk about an online public sphere(s), as public use of the Internet could enhance deliberative political communication and civic engagement, and enable marginalised groups to have alternative arenas in which to express and exchange their views. Poster (1997:216), for example, argues that to 'frame the issue of the political nature of the Internet in relation to the concept of the public sphere is particularly appropriate'; while Papacharissi (2010:119) suggests that, 'online media, including the Internet, could host a virtual sphere to revitalize the public sphere'. Dahlgren (2005: 152) argues that the contribution the Internet makes to the public sphere is 'obvious' as 'there are literally thousands of Web sites having to do with the political realm at the

local, national, and global levels' which help to expand the scope of and space for political communication. In his opinion, it is inappropriate to describe the Internet as a single universal public sphere, but rather, it is a platform that contains several different public spheres for different types of political communication. Such communications can be facilitated by the public authority in the form of 'e-government', or by 'organizations with generally shared perceptions, values, and goals' to promote or assist activities organised by them. They can also be 'diverse civic forums where views are exchanged among citizens and deliberation can take place' (Dahlgren, 2005: 152-153).

By positing the possibility of an online public sphere(s), these authors are not trying to generate a technology-determinist point of view which promotes a 'utopian euphoria' (Papacharissi, 2010:119) about the Internet; but rather, they have tried to establish a connection between the new technology and the well-established public sphere framework as an invitation to further the debate without ready-made answers, to discuss the potentials and limitations of the online public sphere. The connection can be made, because the normative framework of the public sphere speaks of an equally and inclusively institutionalised publicly accessible arena, which facilitates critical debates based on individuals' self-determined opinions and languages. Furthermore, the public sphere should function as a communicative space for individuals to express their concerns and inform the government of their needs, and provides a forum in which the government can engage with and respond to their needs. The Internet has the potential to become such a space and to meet the equality and inclusiveness criteria; while online debates have the potential to facilitate critical political communication and to enable individuals' self-determined expressions of concerns. The online public sphere is thus conceptualised.

The following two sections will review how scholars have discussed the potentials and limitations of the online public sphere.

1.2.2.1 Online Public Sphere, Deliberative Political Debates and Empowerment of Marginalised Groups

The online public sphere can be seen as institutionalised with *equality* and *principally inclusive* criteria, the two criteria that are central to the public sphere theory framework, although it should not be regarded as totally equal and inclusive. Froomkin (2004: 15) argues that the key to equality and inclusiveness of the online public sphere is more equal and inclusive availability and accessibility of information. In other words, individuals could have more equal access to information, including information about government behaviours or decisions, as well as information about others' opinions, and their expressed opinions could have more equal chance of being available in the public domain, and be accessed by other net-users. The Internet offers alternative platforms to publish and gain information, so information is no longer dominantly controlled, selected, manipulated and expressed by powerful entities, the government and mass media organisations. Froomkin does not intend to suggest that accessibility to information would become totally equal and inclusive in the online public sphere, but increasing public usage of the Internet indeed offers more individuals the arenas in which to express their opinions that would not be represented by the mass media, and to access opinions that would not be available in the mass media. Through this increase in the equal availability of and access to expression and information, Goode argues that the once empowered mass media no longer holds a dominant position in representing public opinion, but rather, needs to 'fight to retain their aura of authority and expertise and would lose their power as gatekeeper of knowledge, culture and the public agenda' (Goode, 2005:107). Thus, the power relations between the powerful and ordinary individuals could become more equal and inclusive.

An increase in the equality and inclusiveness of information not only means

that individuals have a more equal chance to express themselves, and be more equally engaged; but also that a more deliberative process in political communication can be enabled, which enhances the individual critical problematization of unquestioned areas. Key to such a deliberative process is individuals' self-determined access to and expression of opinions, as opposed to being fed and represented by mass media opinions. Goode (2005:107) argues that individuals can debate online 'with unprecedented freedom along both horizontal and vertical axes', and thus realise direct 'citizen-to-citizen, and citizen-to-institution' communication. This means interactions can be directly established among individuals, and even between them and the institutions or the authorities; so, what are regarded as public concerns and opinions are truly determined, expressed by individual members of the public, rather than being selected or represented by the mass media. This deliberative process contributes significantly to the *problematization of unquestioned areas* and the *expressional political function*, since it allows the meanings of political concerns, as well as how and where such concerns are expressed and engaged with, to be critically and directly determined by individuals themselves to best reflect their needs and interests in the public domain.

With such a deliberative process of political communication, Papacharissi (2010: 120, 122) suggests that the online public sphere could provide 'citizens with the tools with which to develop informed viewpoints and engage in substantive political discussions', offering a degree of 'reciprocity' and 'mutual exchange of opinion and information' among individuals. Warnick and Heineman argue that it not only enables like-minded individuals to identify those with common interests, but allows them to encounter different/oppositional opinions. Thus, it could also 'play a key role in enabling proponents and opponents on an issue to refine their thinking on major political topics, identify major features at play in deliberation, and engage the interests of people who either share their views or oppose them'

(Warnick and Heineman 2012:52). In this process, political communications around particular concerns can be established as a critical exchange of opinions among individuals with different viewpoints, rather than being dominated by certain agendas.

Such a deliberative process can particularly enable marginalised, minor, or radical groups to express their opinions, or to exchange such opinions with other groups, in ways that not only make mainstream, major, or dominate groups' interests visible in the public domain, but also voices that are alternative and marginal. Thus, political communication can be both more diverse and more inclusive through the online public sphere, particularly, Dahlberg suggests, in terms of enabling those individuals who are outside the mainstream discourse to identify like-minded people and enable them to have a say in the public domain. It could provide 'alternative discursive arenas' for 'oppositional discourses (identities, interpretations, social imaginaries and languages)', 'helping marginalized groups – those groups associated with discourses excluded from the mainstream public sphere' (Dahlberg, 2007b: 56). So once un-reflected opinions and concerns now stand more chance of being heard and discussed by other net-users in the online public sphere. Those excluded or outside voices and groups can even use the online public spheres to form 'counter-public networks and coalitions (or articulations) of radical discourses' that could 'lead to the development of more powerful oppositional discourses' (ibid). They can also support 'online and offline counter-public contestation of dominant discourses' to establish 'contestation of the deliberations of the mainstream public sphere' (ibid).

Such a deliberative process can also occur between 'government and the governed', as Tumber (2001: 22) suggests: 'the new electronic technologies are empowering citizens to participate in new democratic forums', by creating a new virtual public sphere, which provides 'a basis for a new politics and greater political participation by citizens'. But Froomink warns that when

compared to the enhanced interactions among individuals with shared or different interests, or with major or marginal interests, deliberative interactions between individuals and the government are relatively limited. The claim can and has been made that the online public sphere can enhance citizen participation in ways that offer more opportunities to engage in deliberative expression with more equally available and accessible information. However, this is not to suggest that such a sphere can fundamentally challenge the policy-making process at government level. In his study of Britain's UK Online, Froomink (2004: 15) suggests that what has been provided so far is easy access to 'government consultation documents and invites readers to discuss draft bills and to comment on other parliamentary processes'. Such communications, for him, 'initiatives involve little more than moving traditional practices such as notice and comment rule making online', since 'they can offer is to change the volume and quality, but not the nature, of citizen participation in government' (ibid). This means any proposals or petitions still needed to be considered by the already established parliamentary system, which is under the control of the government.

Froomink's arguments show that although he is relatively optimistic about the potential functions of the online public sphere, still does not ignore its potential weakness and limitations. Although the structures of the three institutional criteria and the *expressional political function* can be observed; the *corresponding political function* of the sphere is limited, because even if the opportunities for individuals to deliberatively, equally and inclusively express their concerns towards the government have increased through the Internet, it is still the public authorities that determine the level to which they engage with and respond to all those concerns.

The next section will engage with literature that critically discusses other weaknesses and limitations of the online public sphere in addition to the limited response and engagement from the government.

1.2.2.2 Digital Divide and ‘Political as Usual’ as Critical Interpretations toward the Online Public Sphere

Scholars sceptical about the online public sphere do not deny its existence, but question whether or not such the sphere can deliver the political function as promised. Their biggest concern is power, and that is the power of accessibility, the power to generate influence in online debates, and the power of the government.

In terms of the power of accessibility, online public spheres cannot be claimed to be as fully equal or inclusive, because world-wide and nation-wide digital, and language divides create inequalities in access and expression. Online public spheres are only open to those individuals who have access to the Internet and who are able to communicate online, which is no more than half of the world population. Those who are excluded from the online public sphere are divided from those who have access, and it is only the latter’s opinions that will be therefore reflected in online public spheres. Thus such spheres cannot be described as truly open, equal or inclusive, nor can it be said fully enable all sorts of concerns to be expressed and responded to.

In this regard, Curran (2012: 5) argues that when the Internet first started to be associated with political communication, it was promised that it could offer ‘greater opportunity for ordinary people to communicate with each other than do traditional media’. But such a promise fails to encounter the issues of the global digital divide, the issue of language divide, and the conflict of interests, values and beliefs among people from different nationalities and backgrounds. He points out that although the number of net-users is gradually increasing every year, still the ‘rich regions of world have much higher internet access than poor regions’, and because of such unequal accessibility, this ‘global communion’ is ‘not bringing the world together’, but ‘bringing primarily the affluent into communication with each other’, thus the ‘world’s poor are not part of this magic circle of mutual understanding (Curran, 2012:9).

Even within a single country there is a digital divide. Curran suggests that individuals who have higher education, higher incomes and men are more likely to have Internet access, and therefore can take part in communication; those who are less educated, poorer and women, are less likely to participate. This once again underlines the inequalities among individuals, and those who have already been marginalised still do not have equal access to and participation in public communication (Curran, 2012:11).

The language divide is another factor that means the online public sphere is not truly equal or inclusive. Curran argues that language is 'a medium of power' and 'who get heard' are often determined by which language the individuals are using. Given that English reaches 'a large global public', those who speak English can be empowered (Curran, 2012: 9-10); while those who cannot speak it, stand far less chance, or can even be excluded. Thus Curran concludes that the 'idea the cyberspace is a free, open spaces where people from different backgrounds and nations can commune with each other and build a more deliberative, tolerant world overlooks a number of things'; since the world is 'unequal and uncomprehending', and the Internet cannot change it (ibid).

Even for those who have gained access to the Internet, the power to access and to speak, does not necessarily bestow the power of being heard and valued. In other words, the power to express does not inevitably lead to the power of generating influence in political communication. This is firstly because information online is huge in volume; thus, a single piece of information can easily get lost in the information flow, before being assessed by others. Thus, even though access and availability of information may be on the increase, it does not lead to equal opportunities of being engaged. Without this equality, their expressed concerns may not carry equal influence, and therefore will not be given equal attention.

More crucially, when online public spheres started to be used as arenas for political communication, they were being used by ordinary net-users as alternative platforms outside the mainstream media. Now, the Internet is no longer only used by ordinary individuals, but is increasingly used by politicians, parties, celebrities, media organisations and governments, who can bring their pre-established status into online public spheres. Those already powerful users have established a political use of the Internet, to campaign, to lobby, and expand their offline influence online. For those marginalised groups, because they are already a minority in numbers or radical in their opinions, it becomes much harder to be heard in the public domain and to gain influence as a result.

One of those already powerful ones is the media organisations. As Curran (2012: 19) points out, when media organisations went online, they ‘quickly became dominant’, because they were ‘heavily cross-subsidised and exploited the news-gathering resources and established reputations’. Such dominance means they have already gained the resources and credibility to publish first-hand information, and net-users are still more likely to access the information published by those media organisations, than relying on multiple and independent sources. Thus, opinions from the media organisations are still more widespread and more popular than alternative opinions, and therefore has more influence. The increase in more equal and inclusive access to, and availability of, information has not radically changed the power relations between ordinary individuals and the media organisations; rather, media organisations’ powers have simply extended to include the online arena.

Another already powerful one is the government. As argued before, although individuals can raise concerns through online public spheres, and use this spheres to talk to the government, the level to which the government will listen to these concerns and respond to them is still subject to the already existing political system in each country. Thus, far from establishing equal,

inclusive and critical interactions with individuals, governments maintain their powerful positions.

Government control is the first and the most visible mechanism that authorities can apply to reinforce their power over the online public sphere. This control is easiest to identify in authoritarian countries in the format of censorship; and although censorship can be 'not comprehensive' because of the fluidities of online information, still they are 'effective enough' to control sensitive information and debates (Curran, 2012: 16-17). Thus, although individuals can access information and express their views through the Internet, the level of accessibility and the length of time the information stays on the net depends on state controls, rather than determined by technology. China is a typical example of a national context within which censorship is effectively carried out by the state to maintain control over online debates. The next chapter reviews studies investigating censorship in the context of China, to discuss how debates online can be and have been controlled by the Chinese authorities.

Even in democratic states, government can still maintain their power through controlling the transparency of information, through monitoring online debates and through regulation of the Internet. As Margolis and Resnick (2000: 10) argue 'when it comes to governance... the age of self-regulation belongs to the past of the Net; the future belongs to the government'. They suggest it is more appropriate to view the government not as an ultimate target of deliberative online discussions of political matters (Margolis and Resnick 2000: 97), because according to their studies, 'citizens will prefer to make use of forms and publications regarding government services and information' that are provided by the government, rather than actively engaging in legislation-making processes to challenge the existing system (Margolis and Resnick 2000: 96). This empowers the public authority, because the government still holds the power to regulate the information and discourses

online, which in turn set the rules of online communication; if individuals resist those rules, the government can use the legislation to control or even punish them. Thus, the level to which individuals can really problematize unquestioned areas, the level to which marginalised groups can raise concerns, and the level to which deliberations can lead to genuine response, are still subjected to the authority, rather than the spheres.

Margolis and Resnick (2000: 10) also argue that governments favour the Internet as a tool of propaganda and that they would like to use their 'social and political forces to tame it'. Margolis and Resnick observe that in America, the government uses the Internet as a platform to provide information and services, and official websites are the best examples of this. In this case, when individuals access information and services, they are not actively interacting with the government, but are merely 'audiences or consumers' (Margolis and Resnick, 2000: 79) receiving what has been provided. This is a one-way communication in which individuals cannot directly talk to officials through the sites but only read the standard information they contain. The information provided by those government sites are likely to be supportive of the government, rather than inviting individuals to critically challenge them through deliberative discussions. Margolis and Resnick therefore state that interactive deliberations can occur among activities groups or ordinary individuals by using the Internet, but are unlikely to engage governments and officials.

These critical reflections on the limitations of and concerns regarding the online public sphere are as crucial as those more optimistic views. What they suggest is that the institutionalisation and functions of the online public spheres can be acknowledged but should not be taken for granted. There is no doubt that online spheres have enabled some level of political communication among individuals. What is less certain is how equal or inclusive they can be,

to what extent they confer real political influence, and what the role of public authorities is in these spheres. Thus, it cannot be claimed that online public spheres have brought about totally equal and free political communication, but rather, their institutionalisation and functions need to be analysed country by country, case by case, to critically evaluate both their positive and negative impact on political communication.

When those understandings of the online public sphere are reflected into studies of China online public sphere, it means the institutionalisation and political functions of the online public spheres also need to be examined in the Chinese context. The accessibilities to the online public spheres need to be discussed, to question whether they are equal and inclusive or not. The institutionalisation and political functions of the online public spheres need to be examined with regarding of powers in the country; not only in terms of the powers to have free, critical and deliberative expressions for Chinese net-users with different status, but also the powers to generate influence. They also need to be interpreted with regards to Chinese governments' regulations, engagements and responses, to question how the authorities have regulated the spheres, and whether or not they would actively engage with debates in the spheres, and respond to them.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has reviewed debates and criticism around public spheres, and more specifically around the online public sphere. It argues that public sphere theory can be applied as a normative framework to analyse political communication in both democratic and non-democratic societies. The three institutional criteria and two political functions of the sphere can be applied as specific analytic lenses to empirical data. But such applications should not take on Habermas's ideas uncritically, but need to take into consideration

academic debates around equality, inclusiveness, rationality, language usage, and political functions of the sphere. Debates around the conceptualisation and definitions of the online public sphere have been reviewed, showing how current academic debates have engaged with both the potential and limitations of the online public sphere. They help to identify the critical issues that need to be addressed when researching the online public sphere in China.

Chapter 2. Literature Review: Internet Censorship and Online Political Communication in China

Introduction

The first literature review chapter has focused on the concept and debates around the public sphere theory; and outlined some of the issues around the application of this theory as a normative framework. It indicates that issues raised around access to the public spheres, language usage and the power relations between the public and the government, need to be critically discussed case-by-case, country-by-country. This chapter will discuss online political communication in China in particular, in order to find out what are the key elements academic studies have engaged with when they attempt to apply the concept of the public sphere to discuss China's online political communications. It will firstly review debates around the media system, regulation and censorship in China to provide a context, and then discuss what the key topics, areas and languages are that Chinese net-users majorly engage with in Chinese online political communications. It will then engage with key debates and themes in academic studies that attempt to conceptualise the online public sphere in China. In the final section, the empirical analytic framework this research used is introduced.

2.1 The Media System and Censorship in China

When approaching debates around China's online public sphere, government control and censorship are regarded as key contextual factors (Yang, 2009: 1). Such a context exists, because, as Chan (2003: 159) states when describing the media's political status in China, it is 'regarded as an important part of the ideological apparatus' for the Chinese government to promote the party

interests, stabilise its regime, and control opinions in the public domain (see also: Hassid, 2008: 415, Wang and Ang, 2010: 108). In order to maintain this political status, through which the media serve the party's interests and regimes, rather than being used to fight against it, the CCP has in place different levels and methods of controls, censorship and regulations in the media sector, in relation to political discussions both in traditional mass media and the new digital media.

However, such a context should not be understood as one in which there control over political communications is absolute, with no space for liberal political debates, especially for political communications in new digital media, particular the Internet. Rather, it is a struggle between the government and the public over the Internet: on the one hand, the government tries to maximise its control over net-users' expressions and debates on political matters; on the other, net-users try to survive under such controls and maximise their chances to achieve liberal debates about political matters. As Endeshaw suggests, there is a 'never-ending cat and mouse game' on the Internet in which the Chinese government is the 'cat' who intends to catch information that it regards as harmful for its regime, while Chinese net-users are the 'mouse' who intends to escape from the control to publish, access and exchange information freely (Endeshaw, 2004: 41). As long as this 'game' is playing, the struggle between the two sides remains and as a result, government control is a key contextual feature, within this context there are potential spaces and possibilities for political debate.

Similar indications can also be found in McCormick and Liu's (2003: 146) studies, which suggest there is room for 'uncertainty' when discussing the relations between the government and political communications in China's online public sphere. New media should not be regarded as having totally liberalised political communications in this country, but it is also not the case that the government has totally disabled any liberal communications either.

Thus, rather than rushing into a conclusion that one side has won over the other, a critical assessment is needed regarding the kind of controls and censorships, how individuals debate within the context of control, what effects they can create in online debates, and how the government reacts to them. Such a critical assessment would then lead to a more comprehensive approach when researching China's online political communications.

This section will discuss in particular how the context of control and censorship of the media in China has been drawn, not only towards the Internet, but also towards traditional mass media, i.e. newspapers and TV. Understanding of control over the mass media, helps to highlight the importance of the online media for political communications in China, and it also helps to understand the overall context of political communication in China.

2.1.1 Mass Media

Censorship and control of mass media has existed in China since the nation was established. But the ways in which the Chinese government draws its control in the mass media sector, namely over printed media and broadcasting media, has been changing, as the political, social and economic conditions in China have been undergoing transformation since the 1979 reform. This means Chinese government's intention to conduct political control over media have not been changed before and after the 1979 reform, in ways that it still aims to maintain control over political discourses and information published and broadcasted through the mass. What has changed are the ways in which those controls are exerted. This section will primarily discuss regulations and censorship in the post reform era, because the focus of the discussions is not to provide a complete historical review of the media system in China, but rather, to draw a picture of the contemporary context in which this research is situated.

Zhao (1998: 3) argues that the government's regulations and controls over the mass media in the post-reform era can be regarded as an 'economic liberalisation without political democratization'. This means that although the media sector has embraced a high level of economic autonomy in its productions and operations, the political status of the mass media as the government's ideological apparatus has not changed, and freedom has not been given to media content, especially to political content. To explain this, in pre-reform China, the media was tightly controlled by the Party for the purpose of 'propaganda and persuasion', and acted primarily as 'mouthpieces' for the party (Zhao, 1998: 4). Politically and economically it belonged to and was attached to the government. But after the economic reform started in the late 70s, market-oriented operations were enforced to avoid 'financial losses' in an increasing market-oriented society, in which the government stopped its 'subsidies to media organs and allowed the introduction of market forces' (Pei, 1998: 150). As a result, 'financial autonomy, management decentralization, deregulations, and diversification' were allowed, but not the freeing of 'public discourse' in the public domain (Pei, 1998: 155). Nearly two decades after Pei's observations, Brady and Wang found the situation unchanged, in that although a 'current path of reform and development' can be observed in China, such reforms, rather than weakening the CCP's control, but rather has 'strengthened' its power (Brady and Wang 2013: 21). In the media sector, they suggest, after the 'commercialisation of the Chinese media in recent years', CCP has encouraged the development of a 'limited watchdog role' to help the central government to deal with 'abuses of power at the local level'; but such watchdog functions remain controlled and determined by the central government, rather than independent from the authorities. Chinese media organisations have accepted the 'constraints imposed by the party propaganda system', to publish 'pro-CCP information', to reduce political coverage and in replacement with 'consumerism and entertainment' (Brady and Wang, 2013: 29).

To ensure media content serves its needs, the Chinese government controls print and broadcasting media in the post-reform era through institutional structures and regulations. As Creemers (2015: 53) puts it, both ‘institutions and rules’ in China’s media system are designed to maintain the government’s control over the media. In terms of institutional structures, Creemers (ibid) indicates that the institutional framework in China’s media sector is designed to ensure that the CCP ‘maintains considerable direct power over the entire structure through direct intervention’. In this institutional framework, the ‘party organ’ of the Central Propaganda Department works alongside the ‘ministry-level state institutions’ of the Ministry of Culture, State Administration of Press, Publications, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT), and the State Council Information Offices, with ‘state-owned’ media enterprises, and with other ‘sectors and professional organisations’ (Creemers 2015: 53). Each of the institutions functions within the structural framework to ensure that all actors, including enterprises, organisations and individuals, involved in the production, publication, distribution and broadcasting of media contents are all controlled, regulated, attached, monitored and overlooked by the party system, rather than being independent from it. Thus, even though mass media is operating to make money, it is still inside the party system to serve the political needs of that system.

In terms of regulations, the party organ and ministry-level state institutions in the institutional framework also function as regulatory bodies to ‘formulate’ rules and regulations, so ‘public available expressions’ can be regulated, censored and controlled (Creemers 2015: 53), to prevent unsuitable information being available that publicly challenges the Chinese political system and the government. Creemers suggests that the enforcement of regulations may be fragmented, weak, and unpredictable, which creates a high level of uncertainty and ambiguity in the media sector, but overall, the ‘primary goal’, in terms of maintaining the media system under the Party

control, has been successfully achieved so far (Creemers, 2015: 57-58). Lee underlines Creemers' analysis by focusing on the newspaper sector. She argues that both party newspapers, and the non-party popular press are important players in China's mass media sector, making the overall 'landscape' much more 'diverse, commercial and competitive' (Lee, 2015: 119). But despite such a commercialised landscape, acting as 'mouthpieces' still guides the direction of China's newspapers, for both party and the popular press (Lee, 2015: 117). The General Administration of Press and Publication of China, and the Ministry of Information Industry of China work together, as regulatory bodies by 'using a variety of management tools' to oversee newspaper publication (ibid). Besides 'controlling of ownership, registration of publications', regulating 'areas and method distributions', and over editorial staffs; those bodies also 'manage contents' of new productions by prohibiting certain information from being published in advance of publication, encouraging self-censorship, and enforcing punishments if unsuitable information is published (Lee, 2015: 120). All these mechanisms are installed to ensure the newspapers are carefully regulated to stand in the line with the CCP, and to maintain ideological control. As a result, even though both party and popular newspapers are in the market for financial benefits, they are still regulated to maintain political attachment to the party regime.

On the other hand, scholars have also shown that these structural and regulation controls are not so strict that voices different to those of the government cannot be heard. Scholars have indicated that although the mass media has not been politically liberalised, over the decades, mass media, especially news media has been informative, has partly reflected public concerns, can form some level of public opinion, and can criticising the local level governments. For example, in her 2011 article, Zhang (2011: 104) indicates that the policy towards mass media is becoming more 'relaxed', in

the sense that they have gained more ‘bargaining power’ to ‘negotiation and accommodation with the state’. The mass media organisations’ ability to be more ‘infotainment’ and to report breaking news, such as ‘natural disasters and accidents’ that are intimately related to ordinary individuals’ lives, have increased in the last decades. But she also warns that ‘topics such as human rights, religions, protests, violence eruptions of frustration and ethnic problems, especially in Tibet and Xinjiang, social issues and conflicts that are perceived to threaten the CCP’s legitimacy or the political system do not gain from such relaxed policies’ (Zhang, 2011: 115). Similar arguments have been made Tai (2014: 186) who in her 2014 article suggests that the CCP ‘is gradually adjusting its censorship practices from restricting unfavourable reports to a strategy of “conditional public opinion guidance”’, and ‘[O]ver the years, the propaganda apparatus has banned fewer reports and guided more of them’. The article also found that the central government has tried to ‘fight against the widespread corruption and failures of governance, encourage journalists to write exposes of the misbehaviour of local officials’ (Tai, 2014: 190)’. But at the same time, ‘CCP tends to ban news that directly threatens the legitimacy of the regime’ (ibid). What these findings indicate is that it is necessary to acknowledge the limited yet positive contributions the mass media has made towards political communications around certain issues, but such contributions are still far from being able to lead to public expressions that directly challenge the CCP government and the regime.

As Zhao puts it, the overall situation in China’s mass media sector can be summarized as having ‘not emerged as an independent public sphere outside the Party/state apparatus proper’, and ‘current developments’ in China ‘have not given much promise for the emergence’ of a liberally political communication model (Zhao, 1998: 151-152). But it should also be noticed that, within such a system, there are spaces for the expression of political views, although only in a limited way.

2.1.2 New Media

The Chinese government's principles with regards to controlling digital media, and in particular, the Internet, is not dramatically different to those in place for mass media. Digital media is allowed to operate in a market-oriented way, but control of its structures and contents remains with the government.

Scholars like Kalathil and Boas (2003:15), Qiu (2004:102) and Zheng (2008: 4) have argued that the Chinese government's attitudes towards digital media is contradictory: on the one hand, it has been encouraging the physical expansion of the network and Internet-driven industry for economic purposes; while on the other hand, it is also afraid that the relatively free online information flow could lead to the liberalisation of political communications that challenge its legitimacy. This fear was reinforced through observing the characteristics of online communications and the dynamics of China's early net-users' online debates on political issues.

The Internet is believed by some optimists to be uncontrollable, because online information is stored in a network that is open, fluid and transformable; so principally speaking, once a piece of information is available online, it can go into the 'endless reconfiguration' in the 'multi-layered and decentralized' network, and cannot be completely removed (Castell, 2004: 12). Thus, traditional censorship whereby pieces of information are removed or blocking individuals' access to particular platforms or information, has not been effective in controlling online information flow. This is because removing one piece of information from one particular node in the network will not affect the availability of the information through other nodes in the network. Also, the Internet can break down physical and national boundaries, since principally speaking, the whole world could share the same net. Regulating online information, not generated by domestic users but by global ones constitutes a considerable challenge for national public authorities. Those wanting to apply national laws and monitors may find it hard to deal with this

loss of national boundaries (Castells, 2004: 168).

Because of having above mentioned features, when the Internet first started to be used by a handful of Chinese individuals, the de-centralised and fluid architectures of the Internet had indeed contributed to create liberal political communications. Scholars observe that when a few Chinese elites became net-users in the first 6 years after the formal launch of the Internet, they indeed gained a lot more freedom to access information and to debate, than through mass media. Such freedom had led to more liberal communications about political matters among early net-users, who turned them into deliberative debates, which allowed them to problematize China's political system, the role of the CCP, and to express their concerns. Lee's study in 2003 observes 'the booming of the non-official and non-commercial' webs, such as 'online BBS forums, digital archives', providing Chinese people with a different 'forum for debating current affairs' and expressing their diverse political thoughts, which cannot be achieved through other forms of media' (Lee, 2003:16). Li also observes that from 1997 to 2003, online political communications in China had been based on telnet-based BBS and web-based liberal BBS forms. By referring to Prochaska's study, Li argues that "[M]any of the early BBS operators and users were from the social elite –well-educated, well-paid and well-read. They were ambitious to create a new public culture, explicitly aiming for civic virtue, which 'enshrines free institutions outside the state'" and '[D]emocracy was a major appeal' of political communications in this period (Li, 2010: 67).

Observing those liberal communications, from 2003, the Chinese government started to tighten up its control over online political communications. It established a regulatory framework that installs controls over the physical structure of the network and accessibilities to the Internet; regulates and controls online services providers, including Internet business companies and websites administrators; and regulates and censors online information. To

ensure the successful functioning of such a framework, the SAPPRFT and the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) act as the two main ministry-level regulatory bodies, who establish and maintain the legal frameworks for ‘examination, approval, supervision and administration of internet publishing services’ (China Business Review, 2016). Under their regulations, any domestic companies or organisations who intend to offer services related to the new media, including those who offer online services and who provide the physical networks, need to apply for a license from the regulatory bodies (Harwit and Clark, 2001: 388). For foreign companies, especially non-Chinese based websites, which cannot be effectively controlled or regulated by domestic laws, strict information barriers are set up to restrict access by domestic users. Websites like Facebook, Twitter and Youtube are all examples of sites that are subject to blocking (Goldsmith and Wu, 2008: 92-93, see also O’Rourke et. al, 2007: 12, Clayton et. al, 2007: 72-74). By doing so, the technological ability to provide the basic network for the new media can only be given by the Chinese government, and the ability to structure online platforms that can publish and distribute online information can only be approved by the public authority. Thus the entire network is controlled within the party regime.

Also within this system, service providers are regulated to be self-responsible for the information that is published and transferred via their networks. If a particular IP or a particular website is found to contain sensitive and harmful information, then the service provider facilitates this IP or the website administrators will need to take actions to assist the state monitoring body to censor. Such a responsibility is linked with service providers’ economic benefits, as if they fail to self-regulate and self-censor, their licenses could be revoked, websites could shut down, or they could be given a fine (Li, 2010: 69). For companies who provide information technology services, to avoid financial loss, the revoking of their license or other punishments, Wang and

Hong report that in 2000, “Over 300 Chinese Internet business users [had] reportedly signed’ a voluntary pledge entitled, *A Public Pledge on Self-Discipline for the China Internet Industry*’, including Google, Yahoo!, Microsoft, AOL, and other international corporations (Wang and Hong, 2010: 73). They suggest that these companies “have complied with China’s ‘self-censorship’ laws”, in order to stay in China’s market to gain economic benefits.

For website administrators who provide platforms for online communications, self-regulation and self-censorship are also powerful. Harwit and Clark (2001: 395) indicate ‘[S]ome ICPs have admitted they actively check the content put on web pages’, to make sure contents in their websites are not too ‘political’ or sensitive. In a study of self-censorship on Sina. com, one of the biggest portals in China, Ji (2014: 62) indicates that Sina has an internal monitoring body whose monitoring behaviours are conducted to ensure self-regulation and self-censorship are effectively in place to control all information published and transformed on their websites. This body actively censors and blocks sensitive key words (such as naming of the leader) on a daily basis, to ensure no sensitive information can be published or accessed through Sina (ibid). It also monitors users’ activities, in order to react quickly and effectively. If any Sina users publish oppositional or sensitive opinions, they could be removed, and if needed, access is blocked for particular users (Ji, 2014: 63-64).

Besides service providers and websites, individual net-users are also targets within this regulation framework. Individuals are required to conform to national and website level regulations regarding information and behaviours that they are prohibited from engaging with. If they publish opinions that are regarded by the monitoring bodies as sensitive, their opinions are removed, their access to the websites can be blocked, and their accounts on those websites can be closed down. Moreover, the introductions of the IP address,

allows regulatory bodies to identify the physical location of individual net-users. Such a location enables the authority to arrest the individual who has published ‘sensitive’ information, and bring an offline legal prosecution against them. An example of this, as illustrated by Goldsmith and Wu (2008: 88), is Liu Di, who was regarded by the authority as expressing opinions that were ‘detrimental to state security’. She has been located, arrested and sent to jail.

A more recent method in the public authority’s aim of controlling individual net-users is real-name registration in online communications. This especially affects microblog users, one of the largest user groups in China’s online communications, aiming to require all microblog users to be real-name registered. The Chinese authority has stated that the purpose of registration is to encourage net-users to take responsibility for their online expressions, to reduce rumours and linguistically violent attacks, resulting in a ‘purification’ of the online environment (China Internet Illegal Information Reporting Centre, 2012). But for scholars who study such a policy, it more crucially functions as ‘a tool that the Chinese government uses to prevent Internet users from criticizing government officials or publicizing government corruption’ (Lee and Liu, 2016: 16). The intention is to manage anonymity in online debates: because on the one hand, it allows the authority to effectively control net-users, since they can monitor the real identify of the users rather than monitoring anonymous online accounts, so accounts can be linked directly to the real person. On the other hand, it has established a sense of ‘being monitored and controlled’ for the net-users; by knowing they are watched by the authority, net-users’ intentions and courage to express challenging opinions can be curtailed. Although the enforcement of real-name registration has not been totally effective, there is no doubt about the controlling intentions of the government.

With the establishment of a regulatory framework, what people can express

and access online are heavily regulated and largely restricted, especially with regards to public debates around political issues; such as discussions around Tibet, around the 1989 student movement, or political agendas that challenge the CCP regime. As a result of the gradual tightening of control, Li (2010: 67) argues that the Internet in China has transformed from a ‘free institution outside the state’, into a controlled medium within the party system.

However, increasing control of the Internet does not mean, or at least has not yet led to the total disabling of deliberative political communications through the Internet. The next section will move to discuss what kinds of debates around what kind of political matters still exist in China’s online worlds, despite the restrictions described in this section.

2.2 Online Political Communication, Three Types of Contentious Debates, and Linguistic Violence

2.2.1 The Contentious Characteristics of Online Communications in China

The government’s multiple levels and methods of control and censorship indeed place restrictions on online political communications in China. The question investigated here is within this context of control, whether or not, and if so, how, Chinese net-users resist these controls. For scholars like Tai (2014, 206), the ‘fight’ for Chinese net-users for more liberal expression in such a context, is difficult. But being difficult is not the same as being impossible. Yang (2009: 1) argues that there are ‘misleading images of the Chinese Internet’ whereby ‘because of governmental Internet control, Chinese Internet users do nothing but play’. Such a misconception largely

ignores the 'real struggle' of Chinese people. Meng (2010: 501) also suggests that Chinese online debates cannot be oversimplified, since there are 'very diverse activities taking place in Chinese cyberspace, many of which contribute to a more inclusive communication environment without pursuing overt political agendas'. These scholars show that understanding the restrictions imposed by government regulations and censorship is necessary, but at the same time, political communication in China does exist and needs to be acknowledged. An analysis of China's online political communications can only be accomplished by understanding both censorship and the dynamics of them.

To understand these dynamics, this research uses Yang's (2009: 1) conceptualisation of the 'contentious character' of online political debates, as the 'result of interaction of multiple forces'. The contentious characters help to understand the dynamics of online political communications in China because they draw together a picture that includes not only the crucial actors' involvement in the communication, but also the interactions among them. 'Contentious', this research interprets as debates with contentions. They occur as participants in these debates hold different interests, needs and agendas, which are expressed and exchanged on online platforms, not so much for the purpose of consensus-seeking, but more for the purpose of announcement: to announce the existence of contentions, and to tell other participants what they problematize and dis-agree with. The aim is not necessarily to reach the most reasonable or rational argument through debate, but rather, to reinforce the differences in their political opinions, and to compete their opinions. The 'forces' that form the interactions in contentious debates, this research argues, are individual net-users and the public authorities, as the founding elements in online political communications, who generate and exchange contentious opinions. The net-users can be further categorised according to their political agendas and their online/offline status,

while authorities can be subdivided into local, national and even international levels. The interactions and contentions will vary depending on the specific participants that are involved in a particular debate. By studying the expressions, interactions and concerns raised through different types of contentious debates, it is possible to demonstrate what and how individuals are debating online within the context of censorship.

In Yang's discussions of the contentious characters in China's online political communications, he identifies that although issues of contentions are multiple, still roles and behaviours of the government are the most major sources that causes contentious debates, and the governments can be both the domestic and foreign ones (Yang, 2009: 56). By having the domestic and foreign governments as major sources, three types of contentious debates frequently occurring in China's online political communications. The first type is contentious debates between individuals and local or national governments, as individuals problematize governmental behaviours at local or national level, while the government wants to control or engage with such problematization. The second type is debate between individuals and non-domestic authorities, when Chinese net-users problematize foreign nations, international organisation or particular individuals' behaviours that they consider offend their nationalistic interests and emotions. The third type is debates among individuals with different political agendas. Central to their competitions of opinions is conflicting thoughts towards the Chinese government and the political system, while the western democratic systems and governments are often used to compare the Chinese one with.

2.2.2.1 Contentious Debates as Government-Public Struggle

Yang (2009) identifies the struggle between government and public as the main source of contentious debates in China's online political communication, but the types and topics of these debates is changing. Under the pressure of

state censorship, debates with democratic appeal and debates about ‘human rights’ issues can be judged by the monitoring bodies as directly challenging the state, and thus are unlikely to enter or remain in the public domain (Yang, 2009: 56). But topics such as rights defence, local government corruption and power abuses, and environmental pollution and protection, especially those that are related to the failure of specific government policies, can be discussed online, and are more ‘likely to have some degree of political tolerability’ (Yang, 2009: 55). This shows that, despite censorship, the Internet still provides a platform for individuals to challenge the Chinese government. Increasing control mechanisms and censorship have not entirely removed the space for political debates, nor entirely silenced all political communications that challenge the government. Rather, while effectively reducing the levels of resistance, to prevent individuals from directly challenging the central party regime, spaces have opened up in which individuals can express disagreement with local public authorities, discuss particular issues that are within the political system, and help the regime to improve itself rather than attempt to overthrow it.

Although different from debates with democratic appeals that directly criticize the ‘formal politics of the state’ (Meng, 2010: 503), these contentious debates between individuals and government are politically valuable. In these spaces, individuals do not attempt to challenge the political system or the legitimacy of the CCP party, but they do express their opinions, concerns and disapproval towards local government. This kind of debate enables individuals to deliberatively engage into political communications, to resist the local authority, and to a certain extent, put pressure on local government to adjust their actions to best serve local people’s needs. Because of this, debates in this type becomes the most common form of contentious debate in China’s online political communications.

Among contentious online debates between individuals and the Chinese

government, environmental issues such as the 'rural protests' against the 'industrial pollution of water sources and 'urban environmental activism' (Yang, 2009: 34), are among the most popular topics in recent years. When debating these issues, contention often occurs between individuals and the local public authority, and are represented as a regional problem, which the national public authority distances itself from.

'Localised' environmental debates (Ho, 2001: 897) becomes major because it is a shared concern between Chinese individuals and Chinese central government. Attentions are drawn from the public sides as environmental problems intimately link and seriously impact on individuals' daily lives, and becomes an area that Chinese individuals truly concern about, and have strong desires to express their opinions around (Wong, 2003, Yang and Calhoun, 2007:212, Stalley and Yang, 2006). Attentions are also drawn from central government side, Ho (2001: 914) suggests that the Chinese central government put the radically worsen environment in China is 'high on the political agenda', and discussions around environmental protection are frequently published by the government. But stopping the environment from getting even worse, was beyond its capability (Ho, 2001: 914). One of the biggest cause of this lack of capability, as Yang (2009), and Wong and Chan (1996), indicate is that at the local authority level, environment is not the priority. Local authorities often enjoy certain levels of autonomy in drawing up local development plans and when doing so, the primary consideration will tend to be economic rather than the environment. Therefore, although environmental protection may be high on the political agenda of central government, this has been hard to enforce or realise at the local level. In this instance, central government has realised and encouraged that the public can act as a monitoring force at the local level, to watch the local authority's environment-related behaviours. This opens up the space for the public to discuss their environmental concerns at local level in the public domain, to

identify local environmental problems, and to organise grassroots environmental activities against regional pollution. But as Ho (2001: 914) points out, while the government wants individuals to resist local policies that cause environmental problems, it 'fears the loss of control over society' and does not want to see environmental protests growing into a nation-wide social movement that could threaten the CCP regime.

With the spread of the Internet, contentious debates between local government and the public around environmental concerns are growing, but the localised feature remains. Huang and Yip's study on the Xiamen anti-PX environmental protest is a good illustration of this. In 2008, Xiamen locals considered the local government's plans for a PX (paraxylene, PX for short) factory as environmental unfriendly, since the discharges from the factory were regarded as toxic to the waterways and the atmosphere. The locals argued that the local government's plans failed to address their need for a green living environment, and asked that the plan be abolished. As public concern increased, local government tried to silence these voices of dissent by forbidding all local mass media to report these concerns; so the Internet became the central 'information-hub' (Huang and Yip, 2012: 214) for individuals to express their opinions, exchange information, identify like-minded people, expand influence and organise offline activities. By turning to the Internet, individuals found an arena in which to organise a counter-discourse with which to fight the local government's decisions, and through which to try to engage non-local mass media to report their concerns at a national level. It is also through use of the Internet that Xiamen locals were able to organise offline protests in the form of a 'causal walk' and forced Xiamen government to 'announce the suspension of the project' (Huang and Yip, 2012: 210). Whilst local government was largely criticized in Xiamen, the national public authority did not feature much in their debates. Instead, the debate remained a regional one between local individuals and the local

government. And just as the local government was the primary target of criticism, it was the local government that initially tried to censor public debate and finally it responded to public pressure and suspended the plans to build the factory.

2.2.2.2 Online Nationalism with Multidimensional Contentions

Another key source of contentious character in China's online political communication is online nationalism. The political origin of online nationalism is nationalistic thoughts, and the Internet is the platform where such thoughts are expressed. These communications can be regarded as contentious when international figures such as a foreign government or an international organisation are criticised for behaviours that are regarded as harming a nationalist agenda; this kind of nationalism can also manifest in criticisms directed at Chinese governments behaviours that are regarded as failing to protect China's national interests. Online nationalism is also regarded as a source of contention because when individuals express their disapproval of, or opposition towards, actions or views seen as threatening their nationalist sensitivities, the exchanges are often charged emotionally, expressed as aggression or anger (Kádár et al, 2013: 344-354).

Nationalism's popularity, as Yang (2009: 56) observes, is due to it helping to 'fill the ideological vacuum in China'. Since the reform era, China has experienced a gradual crisis of hegemonic communist ideology, so that communism is no longer the single ideological belief that holds all Chinese people together. As individuals have started to make their own choices, adopt alternative views, different standpoints and agendas, the belief and faith in the communist central government has been eroded (Ding, 1994: 37-52, Lin, 2006: 238-239, Zhao, 1998:289). While individuals have sought new ideological beliefs outside of communism, the Chinese government has sought to regain ideological control; nationalism has been a shared choice for

the government and large numbers of Chinese individuals. As a part of regaining ideological control, the Chinese government has instigated state-led nationalism, which as Zhao (1998: 293) puts it, '[identifies] the party with the nation' and 'makes criticism of the party line an unpatriotic act'. In this state-led nationalism, the CCP has tried to establish a sense that it is the only legitimate leadership of China, and that only under the leadership of the CCP, will the national interests of China be protected. In this sense, the CCP has been described leading the nation and its people, rather than governing it (Mitter, 2005, Gries, 2004, Tang and Darr, 2012). At the same time, popular nationalism has also developed in China at the grassroots level, which may or may not include support for the CCP, but which consists of loyalty towards China as a nation, with its own 'historical' and 'cultural heritages' (Wu, 2007: 8, Zhao, 2004: 191, Yu, 2014: 1176-1178). It is a nationalism which puts an emphasis on 'patriotism' (Cong, 2009: 832) towards China as the motherland that all Chinese people should be proud of, and protect from segregation and foreign invasions.

With both state-led and popular nationalism becoming major sources in China's ideological battlefield, Chinese individuals have become highly concerned about Chinese national interests, and this has become an area of politics that the government allows or even encourages individuals to engage with. Cong (2009: 839) observes that nationalistic thoughts are the most actively expressed political opinions in contemporary China, in the 'most radical way', and the Internet has become the most important platform, for problematizing issues with regards to China's national interests, and expressing thoughts, opinions and emotions with nationalistic appeals. Liu (2006: 153) argues that 'online discursive struggles show that the internet serves as a key site for Chinese nationalism-from-below'. It has been used by individuals with nationalist views to express a 'discourse of dissent' (Liu, 2006: 145) towards a foreign country (in Liu's study, Japan) and towards the

Chinese government. It has also been used for ‘discourse of action’ (Liu, 2006: 149), whereby individuals organise and prepare for further actions such as offline protests. Adding to Liu’s observation, Culpepper points out that the Internet not only allows like-minded nationalists to identify themselves, to express opinions, and to organise offline protests on a much larger scale but also facilitates a ‘competitive arena in which all parties –diasporas, governments, minorities, majorities, individuals, etc. – can compete to represent their own brand of nationalism (Culpepper, 2012: 201). Furthermore, competing parties can react to each other and influence one another’s conceptions of national identity’ (ibid). In the exchange and competition between nationalist views and actions through the Internet, online nationalism has become one of the most important fora for nationalist expression in China.

Contentions showed through online nationalism are multiple. The most fundamental one is anger and disapproval expressed towards foreign nations, mostly Japan and US (Kang, 2013, Liu, 2006, Zhao, 2002, Shirk, 2007), as those are the countries whose actions have been seen as most often threatening China’s national interests; thus Chinese online nationalists use the Internet to voice their concerns. Online nationalistic contentions can be developed as some nationalists judging China’s current political system as failing to best serve the national interests, and believe that only through democratization and replacing the current authoritarian regime can China’s interests be better served; their hope is ‘that nationalism as a social movement can work as a force to push democracy forward’ (Cong, 2009: 839). Unlike the previous group, they will not only criticise foreign nations’ behaviours if they are regarded as harming China’s interests, but will also criticise the CCP as inadequate and incapable of addressing nationalist needs. But certainly, not all nationalistic expression is critical of the government. In large part, as Hyun and Kim observe ‘public use of the Internet for political expression

contributes to sustaining the existing Chinese system rather than undermining it' (Hyun and Kim, 2015:775). Indeed, some nationalists may support the CCP, believing it has successfully protected China's national interests, and will only criticise or disapprove of the behaviour of foreign nations. Some may even see the nation of China and the Chinese central government as one and the same, and thus offer their patriotic loyalty not only to the nation but also to the government.

The value of contentious debates in the context of online nationalism is that it enhances public participation in political debates, allow individuals to be active in politics-related debates, and enables deliberative expressions of political opinions. The various aspects of debates around nationalism demonstrates the complexity and dynamism of political communications in China.

2.2.2.3 Contentious Debates among Different Agendas

Disagreements between individuals with different political agendas also contribute to contentious characters in China's online political communications. Among the many political issues which people hold different agendas with, debates around Chinese political system and the role of the Chinese government is still the main one. Contentions often and frequently occur between individuals with anti-Chinese government and system agenda, and those who support Chinese government and question western democratic systems. As opposed to traditional types of public debate with democratisation appeal, in which disagreement with China's non-democratic system is debated as a shared concern for all participants in the debates; in debates among individuals with different agendas, China's non-democratic system becomes a topic around which individuals holding different opinions can engage with one another. The competition between the two sides may not necessarily be about reaching an agreement about the most

reasonable argument about or evaluation of the Chinese system, but more about an opportunity for individuals to proclaim and reinforce their own political standpoint as different from the imposed hegemonic voice. The Internet offers that opportunity by providing the arena in which those different opinions to express and exchange.

Contentious debates between people who hold these contrasting perspectives are important to China's online political communications because they demonstrate that Chinese individuals are no longer uniformly informed by certain hegemonic values but have become more actively self-determined in their political agendas and opinions, and are able and willing to express and debate them in the public domain. Thus, hegemonic values are being replaced by debate, and the diversity of political opinions and agendas in China are made visible.

Political contentions among different political agendas are the ideological sources for online political communication of them. Those contentions publicly appear in China's public domain as results of the decline of the hegemonic communist value. But this is not to say that different political agendas and ideologies did not exist before the crisis in communist ideology. Yang and Le (2009), Zhao (2008), Xie, Li, and Li (2012) and Rosker (2014) all point out that different political agendas have always existed in Chinese society, including liberalism, communism and traditional Chinese ideologies such as Confucianism. Among them, liberalism and communism were introduced to China in the 19th century, when some of the nation's intelligentsia tried to use western political ideologies to reform the nation (Liu, 2000: 49-50, Cheng, 2008: 384-387, Wei, 2010: 56-57). Although the CCP won the civil war and established a communist regime, and although it cracked down on alternative political ideologies in the Cultural Revolution, alternative political agendas never totally disappeared. Then in 1979, the reforms embraced liberal thinking as far as the nation's economy was

concerned, and the nation re-connected with the western world, liberalism and private political preferences towards liberal democracy re-asserted itself, gradually becoming once again one of the most influential political agendas among Chinese individuals (Wang, 2013a: 188-194, Liu 2000: 54-56).

What the crisis of hegemonic communist ideology brought in is the possibility of publicly accessing, expressing and exchanging these different agendas, and discussing China's political system through these different agendas, although in a limited way. As Nathan and Shi (1996: 522) discuss, state control over ideology 'weakened' in the reform era, so 'public attitude diversified, new ideological alignments took shape'. With those new ideological alignments came the beginnings of public debate. Goldman (2009: 660) observed that 'a degree of pluralistic discourse and openness to foreign ideas exists in China's universities, academic journals, and think tanks, particularly in the sciences, although these institutions are still under the control of party officials'. Qi (2011: 886) indicates that the difference in ideas and political understanding not only exist in the intellectual sphere, but 'the debate ... has drawn in many participants, ranged widely, and probed into some fundamental issues facing Chinese society today'.

Such debates continue to grow, 'thanks to the role of the Internet' (Qi, 2011: 886). Indeed, the Internet offers platforms for individuals to increase their access to intellectual opinions and debates about different ideologies, particularly about liberal democracy and China's own system. Those opinions and debates are a demonstration of the fact that there are different agendas and ideologies to choose from and compare with. Some individuals may therefore choose to become online nationalists, which has been discussed in the previous section. While others may continue to align themselves with China's Marxist tradition and argue that China's political system has to be recognised for its uniqueness in a global context. In online political communications, they may support a pro-CCP agenda, believing that the

social and political struggles in China should be resolved within the existing system, they may be sceptical about western democratic political systems and may argue against democratisation in China (Freeman and Yuan, 2012: 65-71, Song, 2009: 85-94). Others are influenced by liberal thinking and have a pro-democracy agenda. As Liu (2000: 49-50) notes, those individuals 'are dedicated to resistance to repression, respect for individual worth and freedom, and the promotion of liberal democratic institutions'. In online debates, they question the foundational political system in China, as having failed to serve individuals' needs and interests. They ask for recognition of personal, political and economic liberty and human rights, challenge the legitimacy of the CCP and seek the systematic democratisation of China.

When individuals with different agendas come together, debates occur in which they express and exchange oppositional and competing opinions, particularly about the political system in China. The most highly contentious is between those with a pro-Chinese system/Western democracy-sceptic agenda, and those with a pro-Western democracy/anti-CCP agenda (Chen, 1999, Xie, Li and Li, 2012, Goldman, 2009, Qi, 2011), due to fundamentally conflicting political beliefs. The continual and often aggressively competitive debate between the two agendas through the Internet has led to increased polarisation. Tong and Lei (2013: 299) describe the Internet, especially the microblogsphere, as becoming a 'battlefield' for a 'war of positions', in which the already divided Chinese individuals develop and consolidate their divisions. They observe that the Liberal camp, namely those with pro-Western democracy views, is the most numerous in China's online microblog spheres. Following or being influenced by opinion leaders in the camps, who are usually be the intellectuals, elites or celebrities, ordinary individuals use the function of comments and retweets in the microblog to promote their own opinions, while dismissing the opposing set of views (Tong and Lei, 2013: 298-299). The smaller but still significant group of individuals with pro-

Chinese/Western democracy-sceptic views criticise the liberal agenda, label the liberals as traitors who are overly-adoring of western ways and admonish them for denying the values of their own community. Wu's study uses the 7.23 train accident in 2011 to illustrate the intensified debate between these two agendas. According to the author, a major incident tends to give rise to consensus on the one hand, against the officials who failed to address people's concerns; and conflict on the other as people interpret the event from their very agendas. The 'liberals' emphasize the 'system's failure' not only for causing the incident in the first place but also the spread of rumours in the aftermath of the incident (Wu, 2012, 59). The western democracy sceptics argue that it is the very idea of 'freedom of speech' that leads to the rumours, and that a liberal system would not solve the problem either (Wu, 2012: 59). Wu concludes that in the aftermath of the 2011 train accident, individuals with different agendas 'took sides on the debate' (ibid).

The three types of contentious debates discussed above are not the only types in China's online political communications, but they are the three most major and crucial one. Not only in the sense they are frequently occurring in the online debates, but also as reviewed above, many studies have identified and discussed them as key features of China's online political communications. They show that even under strict censorship, there are levels of public engagement in political debate in China. It invites academics not to generalise, but to interpret specific political debates in China's online political communications, so the changing dynamics and diversity of China's online communications can be analysed and discussed.

The identifications of these three types of debates also have methodological importance, as they provide examples of political topics debated online in China. Considering the number of online public debates that take place daily in China, any attempt to carry out an empirical study that includes all of them

would be overly ambitious, over-generalised, if not impossible. Thus, a more explicit way to study them is through adopting a case study approach, which allows the research to focus on major and crucial examples of debate and carry out empirical and systematic analysis of them. While the three debates illustrated above, demonstrate major, crucial and contemporary political contentions and concerns in China's online political communication. They offer basic guiding categories, from which selections of case studies can be drawn from. Guiding by them, this thesis therefore focuses on debates that involve the following concerns and contentions: the contention caused by environmental issues between individuals and government; online nationalism in which individuals are critical of foreign or domestic governments; and debates between net-users with pro-Chinese system/Western democracy-sceptic and pro-Western democracy/anti-Chinese system agenda. The selection of the individual cases used in this research will be discussed further in the methodology chapter.

2.2.2.4 Linguistic Violence in China's Online Political Communications

The previous section identified the debates in terms of topics and concerns. This section discusses types of language that individuals have used when expressing and exchanging contentious views in online political communications. Analysing language usage is crucial, firstly because, as argued previously in this thesis (see section 1.1.2.3), language is the founding element for the communications among individuals. It is through language that opinions are voiced, understood and responded to; so from studying language usage, it is possible to not only understand what individuals are debating, but also how they are debating. Analysing language usage is also important because language is a key feature contributor to the contentious nature of the online political communication in China, in that language is not only being used to form consensus-seeking rational arguments; but rather, to

commit linguistic violence in that individuals use abusive terms to swear, label, offend and attack people holding different views to their own, and use aggressive language to express their anger and disapproval towards the government.

The phenomenon of language being used to commit linguistic violence in contentious debates has already been touched on in the discussions of online nationalism (See section 2.2.2.2). The linguistic violence that Kádár et al (2013: 344-354) observe in terms of the frequent use of abusive language to attack, and to exchange radical positions and aggressive views, can be observed not only in online nationalism but also in those contentious debates between pro-Chinese system/Western democracy- sceptics and pro-Western democracy/anti-Chinese system agenda. Tong and Lei (2013: 300) note that in the ‘war of positions’ between the two agendas, sarcasm and humiliation are used, with individuals from both sides of the argument calling each other ‘50-cents’ party (五毛党)’ or ‘direction-guiding party (带路党)’ respectively. The former implies that the pro-Chinese are not voicing their true opinions, but are being paid a pittance (50 cents) to be the mouthpiece for the government; while the latter effectively accuses the Liberals of being traitors who betray their motherland and welcome foreign invasion. Rather than engaging in rational debate, the two sides use humiliating terms to label the other, and use swear words and abusive language to attack people with opposing views to their own.

Linguistic violence is not being committed in isolated cases, but rather, has become a common feature of China’s online political communication. Scholars have approached this phenomenon from different perspectives. For example, Li (2010: 73) argues that a ‘tendency to sensationalism nurtured by plebeian curiosity and parochial imagination’ is more likely rather than a rational-critical debate with democratic appeal; and Yang (2003b: 473-474) suggests that ‘online discourse can be very uncivil’, and to change such

uncivil discourses into ‘a meaningful discussion’, ‘takes time and practice to gain these skills’. Both of them see the use of linguistic violence as a negative trend in China’s online political communications, which is turning rational-critical debates, into ‘uncivil’, ‘abusive’ and ‘sensational’ arguments, a trend seen by Yang as an ‘obstacle’ to the development of China’s online public sphere, while seen by Li as a decline in online political debate.

Kádár et al. by contrast, see the use of abusive terms and ‘verbal aggressions’ as providing an important resource for the analysis of intergroup interactions in China’s online political debates. While Meng (2011:39) argues that ‘Chinese netizens face the additional barrier of a decentralized censorship scheme that combines coercive measures (e.g. deleting posts, arresting dissidents, etc.) with self-censorship. The cost of taking part in activities directly challenging the authority of the government or the Party can be very high for internet users in China’. Under such circumstances, net-users tend to twist their language in playful and ironic ways, as “a stylistic means of ‘smuggling ideas past a censor’” (Meng, 2011:39).

What Meng and Kádár et al. show is that the phenomenon of linguistic violence should not be dismissed simply as an obstacle to online political communication, but rather as a tendency that is worthy of examination. Because, although the words being used may be abusive and humiliating, still, the political reasons that contribute to individuals using them, and the political functions they fulfil in terms of the expressions of contention, are not meaningless. Linguistic violence does not simply arise through individual deliberative choice, but is caused by the environment of political censorship in China. It offers Chinese individuals a mechanism with which to speak their anger and opposition towards the public authority’s control or any other political concerns and survive under censorship. Analysing the power relations that created by such a specific usage and the political impact of it is critical for understanding online political communication in China.

Thus, this research sides with Meng and Kádár et al. in regarding linguistic violence as a crucial feature of online political debate in China. When it comes to the language element of the public sphere, the research will discuss how this feature contributes to the structure of the online public sphere in China.

2.3 Debates of the Online Public Sphere in China

The above reviews of academic debates around censorship, and the contentious characters in the online political communications under the censorship offer theoretical context, upon which, the academic studies attempted apply the public sphere theory to analyse the online political communications, can be reviewed.

2.3.1 Application of the Public Sphere Theory in China

The public sphere theory has been applied to China before it has been specifically related to the use of the Internet. Even though, in current applications, the attempts to conceptualise the online public sphere in China, and to apply this theory as normative framework to analyse online political communications, have demanded much higher attention, because the mass media sector faces tougher censorship, while the Internet brings more possibilities. This section will firstly briefly review the application of the public sphere theory beyond the Internet, and then move to discuss it with the Internet, so a comprehensive picture of the debates around the public sphere in China's context can be drawn.

Cao (2006: 42) states that the public sphere framework became popular in China in the 90s, with the 'new round of reforms'. Examining relations between the government, the public and the media through the public sphere theory is regarded as 'unique' in 'history studies and media research' (Cao,

2006: 44). Wakeman (1993: 108-109) also indicates it was in the 90s, especially when observing the 1989 Student Movement, western scholars started to discuss whether or not 'we can speak of' the public sphere in contemporary China. Not all scholars accepted the notion of the Chinese public sphere. Huang, for example, argued that he 'might want to reject the further use' of the public sphere theory 'to characterize the Chinese phenomenon' (Huang, 1993:224), but rather to use a 'value-neutral' category such as 'the third realm' as an approach to political debate in China's public spaces (Huang, 1993: 225). According to him, China's specific historical context contributed to different types of state-society relations that could not be conceptualised through the public sphere theory.

Despite Huang's rejection of the public sphere theory, it has gained wide acceptance and currency. Historians such as Wakeman (1998) and Rowe (1990), critically applied the historical category of Habermas' public interpretation, to discuss the historical transformation of the public sphere in modern China. The theory is also and the most applied and as a normative framework to discuss political communications in China between the government, the media, and the public. It is possible and important to apply the public sphere theory to study the political communication in China, because as Cao puts it, the public sphere theory, can help academics to 'explain and solve modern problems' that cannot be answered through traditional Chinese theories (Cao, 2006: 49). This means with increasing academic interests are drawn on how Chinese public interact with its government, the public sphere theory offers a powerful and comprehensive framework to understand such the interactions, as well as their power relations. By applying this theory, Gu (1999) found China's cultural intellectuals who 'actively initiated and participated' in political communications and 'aimed at transforming the existing, state-controlled public space by reclaiming its deserved autonomy from the party-state' (Gu,

1999: 390). While McCormick et al.'s study argues that public discourses in the public sphere in the reformed China had expanded and resulted in the 1989 Student Movement, as a radical form of political communication to express individuals' needs for public 'dialogue, recognition of autonomous social organizations, enforcement of the constitution and laws, establishing a free press and resolving the crisis in parliament' (McCormick et al, 1992: 189). Keana's critical discussion about the possibilities and obstacles to applying the public sphere theory, to 'arrive at a workable model that accommodates the tensions and compromise between official cultural policy and the activities of producers' (Keana, 2001: 787) in the media sector in China. Another example is Steinhardt's discussions on how the transformation of the media environment and policies in China have led to increasing 'exposure of protests event in China's public sphere' through mass media coverage (Steinhardt, 2015a:125).

Public usage of the Internet in the Chinese context is another significant area of investigation which applies of the public sphere theory. Academic debates in this area questioning not only whether it is possible to tale of an online public sphere(s) in China; but also apply the public theory as a framework to study how the Chinese government is controlling the online political communication, how particularly issues are discussed online, and how particularly online sites are used by net-users for facilitating public debates.

For the discussions around the conceptualisation of the online public sphere in China, there are different scholars discussing this issue, but with no conclusion and some people directly used this concept to describe the communication in China. Yang's (2003b) study is an important example. In this study, he suggests 'a nascent form of public sphere has emerged' (Yang, 2003: 456). To understand this 'nascent form of public sphere', it is necessary to understand the 'technical features' of the network, namely de-centralisation, anonymity, and deliberations as well as the transformation of media policy,

including commercialisation, liberalisation, and state-control through regulations and censorship in China. He suggests the Internet is regarded as providing a liberal and independent space for individuals to engage into political communications. Through these engagements, Chinese individuals are 'better informed' and better participated politically. They not only speak for themselves by deliberatively engaging in debate, but can also take collective action through organisations such as 'environmental groups and NGOs' (Yang, 2003b: 466). By facilitating deliberative political debates and organising collective civic activities, the online public sphere is emerging in China enables the 'articulation of social problems and has shown some potential to play a supervisory role in Chinese politics' (Yang, 2003b: 474).

But at the same time, Yang also suggests it is necessary to pay attention to the 'internal' and 'external' obstacles of the online public sphere (Yang, 2003b: 473). With regards to internal ones, Yang argues that unequally distributed power relations among different participants of the debates, and 'uncivil' online discourses have all limited the proper development of the online public sphere in China (ibid). With regards to external ones, Yang believes political control could be gradually put in place by the state, which restrict liberal political communications to prevent democratization and overthrow of the single-party regime (2003b: 457). And the commercialization of the Internet 'may reduce it to a vanity fair of commodities and squeeze out the political action that now takes place there' (Yang, 2003b: 473-474). He also raises the issue of the digital divide as another economic obstacle, but suggests that if China's Internet population can 'grow steadily', there is hope that 'this aspect of the economic obstacle will lessen and not worsen' (ibid).

Similar argument can be observed in Zheng and Wu's (2006) study. They argue that an online public sphere can be seen to be taking shape in China, despite being subjected to government censorship and despite not leading to 'a politically autonomous civic society in China' (Zheng and Wu, 2006: 553).

They further observe that the Internet is increasingly used by individuals ‘as a new battlefield where the state and social groups fight for power and interest’, and potentially or occasionally could influence state politics and policy practices (ibid). Mou et al. (2011:342) also suggest that the conceptualisation of the online public sphere is possible and beneficial for understanding the online political communications in China, since it can bring in an analytic framework for ‘political involvement, especially for nations with authoritarian political systems such as China’. But they also warn that the issue of ‘political nonparticipation’ needs to be taken into account. They suggest that participation rates in political communication in China are low, beside the issues of digital divide, even for those who are already online, half of them tend to remain silent rather than actively expressing any political views. So although they have also described an public sphere in China, they argue there are more to be discussed about the extent to which it can engage people (Mou et al, 2011: 342-343).

Censorship and controls from the government is another theme that is often discussed when applying the public sphere theory to investigate the online political communication in China. This theme is engaged because the relations between the government and the public is the key focus of the theory, and in the case of China, such a relation is often shown as a struggle between the two sides: the government controls the Internet, while the Chinese net-users try to resist. Rosen (2010: 510) argues that ‘many’ scholars engaging with the conceptualisation of the online public sphere in China do hold a ‘more optimistic’ outlook while being at the same time very critical on the issue of censorship. Although they see the potential of tale of the online public sphere in China, censorship and state-control remain as the central context or pre-condition in their analysis. Thus, when these studies speaking of the online public sphere in China, as a space for individuals to communicate about political matters, they also warn that this sphere is not totally free from

government control.

Other scholars see censorship as a more serious issue, such as Li (2010), who argues that while there was ‘an emergent online quasi-public sphere’ in China before 2003, in which ‘Chinese intellectuals and public figures began joining the chorus on the web, participating in online political activities’. But since 2003, not only the sphere itself but also the online political communication taking place in this sphere has been ‘jeopardized by the state and the market’. In this analysis, state control has been the ‘defining factor’ (Li, 2010: 70). Political communications have been regulated, managed and limited by the state while at the same time ‘maintaining the stability of the online public mood’ (Li, 2010: 71). As a result of censorship, the public can still engage in debate in online communications, but the topics they debate about and the opinions they can express, are much restricted. For Li, although he still describes an online public sphere in China, he sees the influences and functions of the sphere are heavily restricted by the government.

In addition to the debates around whether it is possible to conceptualise the online public sphere in China, there are also scholars who adopt a more focused approach by applying the public sphere theory as a normative framework to examine how particular issues are debated, how particular platforms are used, to what extent they enhance political communication in China and to what extent they are limited by state control.

Examples of these issue-specific approaches include studies by Yang and Calhoun (2007), Chen (2010), and Sima (2011). These scholars have applied the public sphere framework to analyse how environmental discussions have emerged in China’s online political communications, and how the public and the government are interacting with regards to those issues. In applying the framework to this, Sima (2011: 478) argues that it is possible to see a rising ‘green public sphere’ in China, as ‘Chinese environmental activists’ effectively use the Internet in “constructing self-representation, increasing

organisational visibility, circulating environmental information or ‘greenspeak’”. The concept of the public sphere is used here to critically indicate the existence of the public spaces and public discourses that are emerging in China around environmental issues.

Examples of studies which adopt a platform-specific approach are Rauchfleisch and Schäfer (2015), and Sullivan (2012), which both focus on the most used online interactive platform in China – Sina Microblog. Rauchfleisch and Schäfer (2015: 139) argue that this platform ‘presents a typology of different kinds of public spheres’. They adopt the critique in terms of multiple public spheres and use their analysis of Chinese net-users’ usage of the Sina Microblog to support this critique. They further argue that this platform can be seen as providing ‘thematic public spheres’ in which issues that already ‘exist’ and ‘have already been acknowledged as problems by the central government, whose existence can hardly be denied’ (Rauchfleisch and Schäfer, 2015: 144), such as environmental issues, can be discussed. There are also ‘short-term public spheres’ where ‘unexpected events’ can be discussed; ‘encoded public spheres’ in which languages are ‘deliberately’ encoded to express opinions that could contain sensitive discourse; and ‘local public spheres’ that have a more local focus (ibid). Their work confirms that the public sphere framework is beneficial in discussing political communication in China, which though limited, still has things to offer. Sullivan (2012) is more sceptical about using public sphere theory to approach Sina Microblog. He admits the potential of using the microblog in China, since ‘enormous numbers, the unusually social and active personality of Chinese netizens, and the mistrust of official information sources has helped Sina Weibo become a contested force in Chinese politics’ (Sullivan, 2012: 799). But equally he warns that such a platform is with ‘walls and adult supervision’ (ibid) because Sina is still a heavily censored platform, in which many topics, issues and even language are monitored and censored, and thus

discussions around those topics and issues by using those languages can hardly emerge or being engaged (Sullivan, 2012: 776).

All the questions, themes and approaches discussed here illustrate how the online public sphere has become a significant and much debated topic in Chinese media studies, with a variety of issues being investigated but more remaining to be discovered.

2.3.2 Limitations of Current Debates

This research argues that there is a level of critical debate generated for applying the public sphere theory to study the online political communications in China, but with three limitations.

The first limitation is that language usage has been relatively neglected in the public sphere framework when compared to issues and platforms; and yet, as has been argued previously, studies of language usage have an important contribution to make in understanding online political communication in China. Although scholars like Li (2010) and Yang (2003b) have touched on the issues of linguistic violence and ‘uncivil’ discourses with specific regards to the sphere, their observations are under developed when compared to observations regarding the topics that are discussed in the sphere. Such a focus is needed because as repeatedly argued in this thesis, language is the basis of the public sphere framework, and this is no different in the context of China.

The second limitation is that, in debates around the online public sphere in China, power relations and interactions between the state and individuals are the main if not dominant focus. Whereas the power relations and interactions between individual net-users with different status have attracted less attention. Although Yang (2003b) has warned that unequally distributed power relations

among different participants in the online public sphere is an ‘internal’ (Yang, 2003b: 473) obstacle to China’s online public sphere, this obstacle remains under investigated. This is problematic not only because focusing on power relations is crucial if not indispensable in terms of the analytic lenses of *equality* and *principally inclusive* in the public sphere framework; but also because power relations among different individuals demonstrate the dynamics and issues that characterise China’s online political communications. Wallis (2015)’s study is an example that demonstrates the neglects of the power relations between net-users when studying online political communications in China. By using gender relations as a specific focus, Wallis argues that in the use of expressions such as the ‘Grass Mud Horse (cao ni ma, meaning ‘fuck your mother’), ‘women’s body parts are amplified in the public sphere to critique a defective government’ (Wallis, 2015: 229). She suggests that this ‘reveals the “limits of gender” through a gendered dual (in)visibility’ (Wallis, 2015: 230). Yet when referring to this kind of language usage, a great number of scholars are more interested in its value as an ironic term to resist government censorship of vulgar online language (such as Meng, 2011: 44 Sullivan, 2012: 776) in the online public sphere. Feminists critiques of gender inequality illustrated in this example tend to be excluded from academic debates, even though looking into such power relations among individuals with different gender status are equally crucial in understanding China’s online political communications.

In addition to gendered power relations, another crucial power relation among individuals to emerge in China’s online space is specifically related to the rise of Sina Microblog as the most popular interactive site in China. In their analysis of Sina, scholars like Sullivan (2012), Wu (2012), and Lee and Liu (2016) all discuss the VIP system, which Sina has launched to encourage social and political elites and celebrities to be real-name registered. After being recognised through their real pre-existing status, those elites and

celebrities are offered Sina VIP status. By introducing categorisations based on individuals' pre-existing social and political status, this VIP system reinforces individual status in an environment which has hitherto disregarded it. In discussion of this system, scholars have focused on how real-name registration could enhance state censorship (Lee and Liu, 2016, Sullivan, 2012), or how those VIPs become opinions leaders when individuals are taking sides in political debates (Wu, 2012). But they have not been examined in terms of what it means to the equality and inclusiveness in terms of VIP and non-VIP users in political debates through the Sina Microblog.

The third limitation is that research on public authority behaviours tend to be in terms of censorship, where the authority's role is that of regulator and controller. Far less research goes beyond the issue of censorship to the question of whether or not the Chinese public authorities would engage in online debates, or even respond to concerns raised through the debates, and if so, how. This is not because Chinese academics have deliberately ignored those aspects, but rather because with Internet controls tightening, there are indeed far fewer signs of engagement and response. Nonetheless, Huang and Yip (2012) have recorded in their study that Xiamen's local government has engaged with and responded to, although in a very limited way, local people's concerns over the PX factory, since the plan was suspended after public opposition. This shows that even a slight possibility is worthy of investigation. Taking into account the complexities of censorship, a close analysis would need to ascertain whether or not engagement and response can be observed, and if so, what form they take. This will bring a new dimension into discussions about the Chinese government's roles and behaviours in China's online political communications.

After reviewing current debates around the online public sphere in China and their limitations, the following section outlines the theoretical framework used in this research.

2.4 Research Framework

This research aims to engage with current academic debates around the online public sphere in China, and contribute to a discussion of the extent to which there is an online public sphere in China'. The theoretical framework is based on Habermas's interpretation of the online public sphere as formed upon three institutional criteria- *equality*, *problematization of unquestioned areas*, and *principally inclusive*, and as generating two political functions – *expressional function* and *corresponding function*. But the application of these concepts will be more critical and specific than in Habermas's original interpretations.

The first analytic lens is the *equality* and *principally inclusive* institutional criteria. This lens focuses on the power relations between different participants in online political communication, to question whether or not it is possible to observe equal and inclusive communication among individuals with different status. If so, how does this contribute to the structure of China's online public sphere and to online political communication in China or if not, what are the factors that restrict the criteria, and what are the impacts.

This research approaches equality and inclusiveness in online political communication firstly by looking into the regulations of online platforms where debates are publicly engaged with, accessed and become visible to all. This approach is indispensable, because a platform's regulation defines how it is constructed and run and it is on those regulated platforms that online political communications take place. A platform regulated with equal and inclusive principles means that individuals can have an open, equal and inclusive arena in which to exchange opinions; and vice versa.

Once the regulations of the online platform have been analysed, the second approach used to investigate the issue of equality and inclusiveness is to examine how participants of the debates themselves perceive their power relations. This approach is necessary because within the regulated platforms,

how the participants interpret those regulations and use the platform will shape the political communications that take place. How individuals themselves understand their power relations, how they portray the (in)equality and (ex)inclusiveness of online debates, offers insights into their power relations in terms of the kind of powers that are expressed, reinforced and constructed throughout the debates.

The second analytic lens is based on the *problematization of unquestioned areas* institutional criterion, along with the *expressional function*. This lens focuses on the interactions between Chinese net-users and the Chinese government, to establish whether or not individuals can problematize the government and express their political concerns in online political communication; if so, how this contributes to the structure of China's online public sphere and if not, in what ways the structure of the online public sphere is restricted.

To answer the questions raised by this analytic lens, this research will focus on *what* has been said, and on *how* it is expressed. In terms of *what* is said, this research focuses on the topics and issues that individuals in China's online political communication problematize as unquestioned areas, on towards what level of governments the expression of their opinions is directed, and by associating with what types of roles, the Chinese public authority is problematized.

In terms of *how* topics are discussed, this research focuses on language usage in online political communications, and specifically with the 'sensational' and abusive tendencies – the instances of 'linguistic violence' - in online debates. It investigates the specific terms of abusive words that individuals use when expressing their opinions, and whether the abusive words are used against individuals, organisations or the government, how they are used in communications, and how they might contribute to, or limit, individuals'

problematization of public concerns.

The third analytic lens, *corresponding function*, questions how the Chinese government controls and react to online political communication in China, and how their actions (or reactions) contribute to or limit the structure of China's online public sphere.

To achieve this, the research firstly examines government control and censorship by studying how regulations at national and websites levels are written to define individual rights and obligations in online political communications. To study regulations is to study the legislated agreement upon with Chinese authorities carry out their behaviours. This does not mean that Chinese public authorities will always act according to those regulations, nor that their attempted actions will be written in to the regulations, but regulations still provide a fundamental insight into their attitudes. Such a framework also helps to establish the boundary between what the Chinese government considers to be sensitive and non-sensitive issues, and their intended actions in dealing with them. The research analyses how the public authority use regulations to reinforce, legislate and consolidate its control over political communications.

This research then assesses whether or not the Chinese government is likely to engage with individuals in online political communication, or more, they respond to concerns emerging from the online debates or not. It will not only analyse the government's engagement and response towards issues and concerns, but also assess whether and how the government engages with and responds to linguistic violence, by using what platforms and through what ways they engage and respond, but also at what level of government (local or national) engagement and response come from.

Chapter Summary

This chapter discusses the censorship and contentious features of the online political communications in China. It then reviews academic studies that applying the public sphere theory in discussing online political communications in China. All those discussions then lead to an introduction of the research theoretical framework.

Chapter 3. Methodology

Introduction

This research asks the question *how is the online public sphere structured in China?*, and aims to use the theoretical framework provided by public sphere theory to study online political communication in China. After reviewing the literature, three analytic lenses have been identified as necessary when applying the public sphere theory to empirical studies:

- 1) The first is the *equality* and *principally inclusive* institutional criteria. This is used to examine the power relations among different players in China's online political communication in order to ask whether or not communication in China's online public sphere can be carried out equally and inclusively among different participants, and if so/not, how.
- 2) The second lens, consisting of the *problematization of unquestioned areas* institutional criterion and the *expressional political function*, is applied to examine how Chinese individuals problematize the Chinese authorities. It not only asks whether or not, and through what issues individuals problematize the Chinese government in online political communication and how the roles of the authority are portrayed and associated, but also asks how linguistic violence is used to express opinions, and what functions it fulfils.
- 3) Thirdly, the *corresponding political function* is used to examine the public authority's behaviour. Focus is not only on government regulations aimed at control and censorship but also discuss whether or not, and how public authorities engage with individuals' problematization of concerns and their language usage in the public sphere.

A case study approach is used in this research, since it looks at specific expressions, discourse types, and actions used in individual debates and government behaviours, rather than aiming at an overall and general picture. Individual circumstances need to be examined in order to generate concrete discussions. Considering the dynamics and the quantity of online debates occurring in China every day, case study is suitable for this type of specific analysis.

Three cases in two online platforms have been selected. The reasons and processes of selections of cases will be discussed in Section 3.1. Data collection and empirical discussions around the cases are based on the three analytic lenses outlined above. Content analysis and discourse analysis are the two major methods used to analyse the data as appropriate for the three different lenses, since these lenses focus on different issues in political communication, and ask the questions of both ‘whether’ and ‘how’, and therefore cannot be generalised through one type of measurement or analysis. This will be explained more specifically in Section 3.2.

3.1 Selection of Case Studies

The three cases chosen for this research originate from Tianya BBS and Sina Microblog. These two sites are used not only because they are the two most popular interactive platforms in China, but also because they are arenas in which large numbers of original public debates take place around political issues. Among them, BBSs have the longest history in China, and have long been important arenas in which individuals can express political opinions and debate about political issues (CNNIC, 2011a, CNNIC, 2010). Tianya BBS is one of the most crucial and popular one, and has been repeatedly used by scholars in their studies on online political communication and the online public sphere in China (See for example Li, 2010; An and Yang, 2010). Tianya

BBS is also important in its ability to continually facilitate major, original and challenging political debates. As Li (2010: 65) puts it, Tianya BBS could be argued to be ‘China’s most popular public forum’, which ‘has generated the most controversial and influential online debates and, in turn, has attracted massive media exposure and public responses’. Sina Microblog is a relatively new platform, but its popularity and function is growing rapidly. Sina Microblog can be seen as China’s equivalent of Twitter, and since Twitter is blocked in China, Sina Microblog has become a successful replacement (Sullivan, 2012). According to statistics from Alexa (2016), Sina Microblog is the 5th most visited website in China, and it is also the only interactive discussions site among these top five³. Like BBS, Sina is not only popular, but facilitates original and first-hand public debates around political issues. According to China’s Internet Network Information Centre, in 2015, 33.5% of Chinese net-users were using microblogs, and the primary function of the microblog is that it enables users to ‘access and share’ the ‘latest news (新闻热点)’, ‘interested contents (兴趣内容)’, ‘specialised knowledge (专业知识)’ and ‘public opinions (舆论导向)’ (CNNIC, 2016: 57). When compared to other interactive sites that emphasize interpersonal connections, the microblog is characterised by political engagement, in ways that enable net-users to use the platform to access, engage in and exchange, original political opinions around current affairs.

3.1.1 Three Cases

This research has chosen three public debates that occurred on these two platforms, to conduct its analyses. The criteria used to select the cases was a high level of public engagement, because they demonstrate the topics, concerns and issues around which individuals were willing and need to

³ They are: 1. Baidu.com (a search engine), 2.qq.com (a service portal), 3. Taobao.com (an online shopping website), and 4.Sina.com.cn (another portal, Sina Microblog’s owner)

express and exchange opinions. Both websites automatically generate rankings to show the most replied/commented/retweeted posts, and rankings were tracked between September 2012 and January 2014. On Tianya BBS this facility is referred to as 'Ranking of Heated posts (热贴榜)' and on Sina as 'Heat Microblogs (热门微博)'. By observing these two ranks, debates with the highest participation can be identified. This observation period was selected not because cases before this time period were not important, but because as China's online communication is in a continuous process of transformation, in order to have an up to date picture of it, it is necessary to understand and review both previous studies and keep up with emerging cases.

The selection of particular cases from these two rankings are based on the identification of three major and crucial types of contentious debates, as discussed Section 2.2.1. They are: contentious debates between individuals and authorities, especially local public authorities, over environmental issues; contentious debates around nationalism; and contentious debates among individuals with different political agendas on China's political system and its government. According to these three types, this research observed and identified posts about the Chinese political system, the role of CCP, towards particular environmental issues, and related to China's national interests. The posts with the highest participation were recorded, after which primary sources and academic studies around similar topics were reviewed. The three cases were constructed by combining primary and secondary sources.

3.1.1.1 Kunming's Oil Refining Industrial Plant Case

The first case is a public debate around the building of an oil-refining industrial plant, of which sub-productions including PX products, in the Anning area of Kunming city in the province of Yunnan. It is an example of a contentious debate taking place between individuals and both local and national government around environment issues. In this debate, plans to build

an oil-refinery were being promoted by the national public authorities as part of its national resource strategy (Chen, 2010: 2-4), and by the local authorities for the development of the local economy. However, Kunming locals considered it to be environmentally damaging and thus asked for it to be scrapped. The primary platform for this online public debate was Sina Microblog. Following the online debate, both national and local public authorities reacted to and engaged with the debate, all be it to a limited extent, through the party media and the Sina Microblog.

As reviewed in the previous chapter, there has been a considerable increase in concerns about the environment in China, and the environment has become one of the most common contentious topics between individuals and public authorities in online political communication. This is reflected in both Tianya and Sina within the observation period, during which a significant number of the debates were around environmental issues. Among them, the Kunming case was selected because it was one of the most significant events at the time. Its significance lies in the nature of the issue and the fact that it generated huge public participation and gained government recognition.

The Kunming case is one among a stream of opposition to PX in China, even though PX production is only one part of the whole industrial plant⁴. The key contention in this trend is public authority's intention to have PX factories locally, but individuals resist against them. Debates around PX production has become central to China's environment-related debate because of the 2007 Xiamen protest (Huang, and Yip, 2012). Ever since, a number of similar protests and debates have occurred in cities such as Dalian, Chengdu, Shifang, Ningbo, and Kunming. What makes the Kunming case important, is that from Xiamen to Kunming, the dispute over this particular issue showed a visible

⁴ PX is short for para-xylene, which is a common secondary product in petrol production and widely used for manufacturing plastic and polyester. However, despite of its wide usage in industrial production, PX could be toxic if spread into atmosphere.

level of sustainability which took it beyond the specific local case to become a nation-wide issue. Xiamen can be regarded as the starting point, with the Kunming case a landmark in terms of isolated anti-PX protests developing over time into a potential movement, sustaining the debate around a particular issue. Such sustainability in environment-related political communication was regarded by Stalley and Yang in their 2006 study as not existing in China. They argued that environmental protests in China could not be called movements because although there were debates around environmental issues, there was an 'absence of sustained contentious action' (Stalley and Yang 2006:335). What the Kunming case shows, alongside other emerging anti-PX debates and protests across China, is that contention around a particular environmental issue could and has gone beyond the individual case, and developed into a sustained contentious debate. The significance of Kunming as a landmark event in China's environmental movement is not only proven by the public through their participation in the debate, but also by the Chinese authorities. The China Environment Report (2014), the national official newspaper owned by China's Ministry of Environmental Protection, named the Kunming case as one of the 10 landmark events of 2013. It is the only anti-PX event, which was chosen in this rank, as the key event in China's environment protection in 2013⁵. The case was unique in terms of the level of public communication around it, the attention given to it by the public authorities and the political impact. For all these reasons, it was chosen as a case study for this research.

The Kunming case generated extremely heated debates, especially between April and June 2013. Large numbers of posts, comments, and retweets were generated on different Sina Microblog accounts during the observation period, along with sustained censorship. Almost all the posts recorded in this research

⁵ Access through: http://www.cenews.com.cn/sylm/jsxw/201401/t20140120_763889.htm,
Access on: 31/07/2014

were immediately or eventually removed from the platform. Some of them were supposedly ‘removed by the author’ (此微博已被作者删除); some were marked as ‘you do not have the rights to see this microblog post’ (您没有查看此微博的权限), and some as ‘according to the national laws and regulations, the relevant content has been deleted’ (根据国家法律法规, 相关内容已被删除).

Thus, the Kunming case also illustrates the issue of censorship and regulation in online political communication in China; but this created difficulty for empirical research. As a result of censorship, only 2 microblog posts that were recorded by this research survived. The first of these was generated by a Sina Microblog user, ‘China Capital Reports Net (CCRN)’, an account belonging to a non-party news website, established by Beijing Chuang Ye Zhi Cheng Management and Consultation Limited Liability Company (北京市创业致成管理咨询有限公司); the second was generated by a user ‘21st Century Economy Report’ (21st CER), an account belonging to a non-party newspaper owned by Gunagzhou 21st Media Ltd. The recorded posts in the two accounts are publishing a same article: ‘Why Does Kunming Move in Reserve?’ (昆明为何“倒行逆施”?)⁶.

These two posts, are the first round of posts that indicated and discussed Kunming’s issues in April 2013, and are the only two of this first round that have survived after censorship. This first round of posts was crucial because it informed individuals about the plant and started the big debate. Since other posts were eventually removed, the two that remained were repeatedly referred to and engaged with in subsequent comments/retweets. A high level of public engagement can still be observed in these two posts.

The reason why these two posts survived censorship is unknown, since the process of monitoring and censoring is not a transparent one. However, this does not invalidate the two posts as valid data for analysis for two reasons:

⁶ For ethical consideration, the author of the article keeps anonymous.

firstly because these two microblog posts prompted such a large number of public opinions through their retweets and comments; secondly they should not be rejected simply because the government chose not to censor them. Even if the reason they were not censored is because they defended public authority interests, they still count as communications around the issues in the public domain, and therefore should be examined rather than ignored. Thus, these two surviving posts are used.

Beside public opinions generated on Sina, this research also observes government engagement and response through both the traditional media and the Sina Microblog with regards to the oil refining plant. It was possible for this research to identify the existence of the government's engagements and correspondence, because Kunming's mayor opened a microblog account in May 2013, and the first blog post made from this account entered the 'Hot Microblog' ranking, which this research observed and recorded. After observing this, this research determines to analyse it, because this microblog provide valuable and unique sources to understand the public authority's engagements and responses in this political communication. It is valuable and unique because Kunming's Mayor was the first mayor in China to open a microblog account and the microblog was firstly used to engage with individuals regarding the Kunming oil-refining industrial plan⁷. Not only was this a first in China, but it is also significant that it took place on Sina Microblog, where the debate around the issue first emerged and developed. By opening this microblog account, Kunming's mayor entered into the online public space, and to compete directly with other net-users in the same arena.

Another important source in this case study is the traditional media, namely three key party newspapers: Kunming Daily, Yunnan Daily (two local party newspapers), and People's Daily (the central party newspaper). They are used to analyse the government's opinions, discourse and actions with regards to

⁷ Access through: <http://www.weibo.com/p/1005053258074703>, Access on: 10/10/2014

the oil-refining plant and to the online political communication around it, outside of the Kunming mayor's Sina Microblog. These party newspapers are used to study the public authority's behaviour because as reviewed in the previous chapter, they often act as crucial mouthpieces through which government actions are reported, and through which their interests are reinforced.

It is necessary to note here that protests also occurred offline in Kunming. But to avoid being overly-ambitious and sacrificing breadth for depth, this research will not engage with these protests. Also, the primary focus of the research is the online public sphere and its analytic lenses are specifically designed for the online environment. A study of offline protests would require its own research framework.

3.1.1.2 Debates around Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in Tianya BBS Case

The second case is an example of what the research calls Chinese online nationalism, a BBS discussion around the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, a string of uninhabited islands that are the subject of dispute between China and Japan. The discussion has been taking place on Tianya BBS and began on the 19th September 2012. The last post was submitted on the 3rd June 2013 and was still open to reply⁸. The focus of the dispute is the 'purchase island event', which started with a proposal from Japan's right wing politicians in April 2012 to purchase the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands from its private owner, so that the Japanese nation would be the legal owners. In September 2012, the Japanese government confirmed the purchase plan and spent 2.05bn yen to buy them⁹. The debate on Tianya started after this was announced. The main

⁸ Tianya (2012) *Diaoyu Islands Blind Your Kind Eyes; Japan Is Also Very Innocent* (钓鱼岛蒙住了你善良的眼; 日本也很无辜), in *Tianya*, Access through: <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-worldlook-572419-1.shtml>, Access on: 31/07/2015

⁹ A selection of reports of the purchase plan incident from UK media: BBC (2012) *Japan Confirms Disputed Islands Purchase Plan*, in *BBC*, Access through:

debate was between anonymous Chinese net-users who believed China was the legal owner of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, and a handful of anonymous individuals who defended Japan's right to purchase them. A few net-users suggested that the Chinese government had failed to protect China's national interests in this instance; no direct government reactions to this criticism were observed.

This debate was chosen as an example of China's online nationalism, because of the issues that arose within this debate and the level of public engagement. Tensions in China-Japan relations is one of the most intensely debated topics that can be classed as related to nationalism. Scholars like Liu (2006), Zhao (1998), Tang and Darr (2012), Kang (2013), Wang (2010), Gries (2004), and Klein (1994) have all observed that Japan is a key source of nationalistic communications in China, invariably generating public interest, debate and even large scale protest. Among all issues in China-Japan relations, the ongoing dispute over Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands is the most concerned, debated and interested one (Tang and Darr, 2012; Downs and Saunders, 1998; Kang, 2013). This is because public concern over land dispute with Japan has a long history in reminding the Chinese public Japan's invasion and appropriation of Chinese territories in the Second World War. The possibility of losing land again is therefore of intense concern to the individuals who are interested in Chinese-Japanese relations. The level of public interest was also due to ongoing conflict of various degrees of severity at government and grassroots level over the years, between the two nations over this disputed territory (Kang, 2013: 164-165, 171-172). These recurring conflicts have contributed

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-19540469>, Access on: 03/01/2015, Ryall, J. (2012) *Japan Agrees to Buy Disputed Senkaku Islands*, in *Telegraph*, Access Through: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/japan/9521793/Japan-agrees-to-buy-disputed-Senkaku-islands.html>, Access on: 03/01/2012, McCurry, J. (2012) *Tokyo's Rightwing Governor Plans to Buy Disputed Senkaku Islands*, in *Guardian*, Access through: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/19/tokyo-governor-senkaku-islands-china>, Access on: 03/01/2015

to a growing debate, attracting further attention and reinforcing individuals' concerns around the issue of Diaoyu/Senkaku. This accumulation of attention and concern takes the Diaoyu/Senkaku issue beyond the specific debate and instead makes it crucial of China's online political communication.

Based on observations carried out for this research, Chinese-Japanese relations and the Diaoyu/Senkaku issue were the most debated nationalism-related topics online, confirming the findings of other studies. Among all debates that can be categorised as nationalistic, Japan's plan to purchase the islands has been the most critical one, because of the degree of government attentions and public engagement. At governmental level, the Chinese government produced different statements on different occasions, and undertook various diplomatic actions with regards to this purchase plan, including the presentation of a white paper published by the State Council Information Office claiming ownership of the islands on historical, geographical and legal grounds (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2012). This is the first white paper that the Chinese public authority published with specific regards to the Diaoyu/Senkaku issue. Meanwhile, at grassroots level, nationalist anger and concern became tremendous. Huge numbers of online debates took place on various platforms, and offline protests were held in major cities to raise awareness¹⁰, making this a major and, significant event in this period.

¹⁰ A selection of western and Chinese media reports of the protests and debates: Spegele, B. (2012) *Anti-Japan Protests Mount in China*, in *Wall Street Journal*, Access Through: <http://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390443720204578000092842756154?KEYWORDS=panasonic+china+protest&mg=reno64-wsj&url=http%3A%2F%2Fonline.wsj.com%2Farticle%2FSB10000872396390443720204578000092842756154.html%3FKEYWORDS%3Dpanasonic%2Bchina%2Bprotest>, Access on: 03/01/2015, Xinhua (2012) *18 Detained in Guangzhou for Violence in Anti-Japan Protests*, in *Xinhuanet*, Access Through: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-09/20/c_131861231.htm, Access on: 03/01/2015, Ng, T. and Lee, A. (2012) *Beijing Threatens to Clamp Down on Anti-Japan Protests*, in *South China Morning Post*, Access

Tianya BBS was identified as the primary platform for online debates around this key event. As has been discussed, underlining that BBS has consistently been the first and the most used arena for individuals to access, express and exchange opinions around emerging events in relation to ownership of Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands (Wang, 2010: 144, Kang, 2013, 171). Tianya, as the most popular BBS in China, has enabled many debates to be facilitated.

The specific post selected for this research was one of the most replied to posts on BBS Tianya around the purchase of Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands during the observation period, appearing in the 'Rank of Hot Posts' in September 2012. Despite the huge amount of information flow and posts about Diaoyu/Senkaku, this post ranked as the 4th most replied to post about Diaoyu/Senkaku in 2012, the only post about the purchase plan that was still in the rank. Because of this high level of participation and engagement, this research selected this post as the example case study.

3.1.1.3 Writer A's Sina Microblog Case

The third case consists of a series of debates that occurred in a Sina Microblog user A's page between 01/12/2012 and 01/01/2013¹¹, and the microblog post, comments and retweets made on the blog page within this period of time. The microblog account owner A, is real-name registered in Sina, as a writer and script writer. This case is an example of a contentious debate involving different political agendas in China's online political communications. In this microblog within this period, participants expressed and exchanged opinions according to their own agendas, around a loosely defined central topic: a

Through: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1039384/beijing-threatens-clamp-down-anti-japan-protests>, Access on: 03/01/2015

¹¹ For ethnic consideration, the name A is kept anonymous in this research. Blog address: http://www.weibo.com/p/1005051191808911/weibo?is_ori=1&is_forward=1&is_text=1&is_pic=1&is_video=1&is_music=1&key_word=&start_time=2012-12-01&end_time=2013-01-01&is_search=1#_0, Access on: 20/04/2013.

comparison between the American and Chinese systems.

The account owner Writer A held view strongly opposed to the Chinese authoritarian system and supportive of the American democratic system. Such views are evident in his microblog posts in which when he discussed different issues and topics about the two countries. Other microblog users, who accessed A's pages, expressed their opinions by using the comment and re-tweets functions in response. Some people sided with A while others defended the Chinese system against A's views. Some positioned themselves in between. Upon reading the comments/re-tweets, A then published further posts and the process continued.

This case was selected as an example of contentious debate among different political views, because of the high level of interactions, continuities and intensifications. These three features are very characteristic of debates of this type, in terms of the constant and even radical or violent exchanges of opinions among different agendas, when comparing the Chinese system with others.

A large number of debates around this topic, observed on Tianya and Sina in this period, were often of the 'one-round' type. In other words, a blog was posted, others read it then commented/retweeted it. Those comments/retweets were made only as responses to the main blog posts. Once those readers had expressed their opinions, they would not return to the posts, nor read or reply to others' comments. The users who made the main posts would not read those comments/retweets either, nor respond to them. The debate thus ended. In this one-round, although opinions were expressed, there was no continuity to the exchanges and level of interaction was low.

In case A', by contrast, opinions were continually generated, received, then responded to through a number of blog posts, comments and retweets in that one-month period. Individuals joined and re-joined the debate around the Chinese versus the American system through this microblog, not only to

express what they thought, but also to exchange opinions with others. Different topics and issues constantly came up to expand on or respond to, what individuals had previously discussed, thus developing opinions further. In this process, interactions among individuals with different views were continually developing, and opinions and positions repeatedly reinforced. Debates also increased in intensity through this continual interaction and exchange of opinions. This involved participants adopting increasingly extreme positions, exchanging flame or attacking people with different agendas through swearing, humiliating and abusive words, and various forms of linguistic violence were consistently used, received and responded to.

The one-month period between 1st December 2012 and 1st January 2013 was selected because this was the period when participation was at its highest and it is during this time that the debate was at its most intense. The debate became so intense that user A no longer felt able to handle it and on the first day of 2013, A announced on this microblog that he would no longer open his blog for public comments, so as to prevent further linguistic violence.

3.1.2 Sources from Government and Party Media

The three selected cases are the primary sources for this research to study the opinions, concerns and discourses generated by Chinese net-users in online political communications. But only by observing those cases on the two platform, public authority actions towards the issues that were the subject of these debates was not sufficient, except in the Kunming case. In terms of A's microblog and the debate focusing on the Chinese system and the role of the CCP, there was no evidence of publicly visible government engagement. As for the Diaoyu/Senkaku debate on Tianya, although the Chinese government did engage with the purchase plan itself, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that those engagements happened as a result of that specific debate on Tianya. Instead, government behaviours such as the publication of the

above mentioned white paper, can be seen as simply about protecting its own national interests partially in response to public concerns about the plan in general; but there were no strong empirical indications to suggest that the online political communications on Tianya BBS were specific contributors. This is in strong contrast to the Kunming case, in which the Kunming mayor's microblog account is powerful evidence of government engagement with a specific issue.

In order to understand the government's actions towards China's online political communications more comprehensively, this research drew on two further sources of data in addition to the mayor's microblog and the three party newspapers as already mentioned. Firstly, government regulations will help to understand the Chinese government's legal framework of control and censorship. This draws the most crucial context for online political communication in China. Specifically, three pieces of regulation will be analysed: the National People's Congress Standing Committee's Decision on the Safeguarding of Internet Security (2000); Sina Microblog Community Convention, and Tianya BBS Users Convention¹². The 2000 regulation document is fundamental to understanding of the Chinese national public authority's attitude and proposed actions with regards to online information and online political communications. Tianya and Sina's regulations are not governmental ones, but as argued in the previous chapter, it is crucial for website administrators to follow national regulations, and take responsibility for

¹² National People's Congress Standing Committee (2001) *National People's Congress Standing Committee's Decision on Safeguarding of Internet Security* (全国人民代表大会常务委员会关于维护互联网安全的决定), in *National People's Congress Standing Committee of the People's Republic of China*, Access through:

http://www.npc.gov.cn/wxzl/gongbao/2001-03/05/content_5131101.htm, Access on: 16/06/2015,

Sina Microblog (2015) *Sina Community's Rules and Regulations*, in *Sina Microblog*, Access through: <http://service.account.weibo.com/roles/guiding>, Access on: 16/06/2015,

Tianya (2015) *Tianya BBS's Users' Convention*, in *Tianya*, Access through: <http://service.tianya.cn/guize/gongyue.do?classtype=3>, in *Tianya*, Access on: 19/07/2015

monitoring their own website to prevent their contents from being judged by the government as harmful. Analysing their regulatory framework contributes to understanding of the legal architectures of the two sites, and to discuss how they conform to the national regulations.

The second data source is the official website of Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), the direct and specialised governmental organ that is responsible for online activities in China. It provides information that directly reflects the government's interest, needs and opinions. CAC's website was analysed to ascertain the public authority's response towards the use of violent language in political communications. Reports, documents and statements from the CAC website were identified and coded, to found out whether or not the government discussed the issue of linguistic violence online. This analysis does not relate to the three cases specifically, since no direct government engagement with regards to use of language was observed in any of the three cases. Instead, the government's general engagement with and response to linguistic violence in online communication is discussed in order to understand the government's attitude, as this understanding is an indispensable element in a comprehensive analysis of the structure of the sphere in this research's framework. Thus in this instance, the research goes beyond the individual case and instead turns its attention to the language issue as a whole.

A report published by People's Daily Online, entitled the People's Daily Survey Report of Vulgar Using of Language on the Internet (网络低俗语言调查报告) was also used as a data source. This report is the first official paper to specifically discuss online linguistic violence and is used to analyse the discourse used by the party media to convey the government's attitudes towards online linguistic violence.

3.2 Methodology Framework

The selected cases will be examined through three analytic lenses and using two methodological tools, content analysis and discourse analysis. Each analytic lens is allocated with aligned methods to study questions raised within it. Content and discourse analysis are used for this research to examine texts, and they are texts in the regulations defining what types rights are giving to what types of net-users, and defining the powers for the government; texts posted in the online political communications that constructed different powers to net-users, and that show the public opinions and concerns; and texts in the party media and official documents that speak of the government. The combination of the two are needed because the three analytic lenses in the research framework ask two types of questions: ‘whether’ and ‘how’. To answer the ‘whether’ type of question, it is necessary to identify the occurrence of certain information, and content analysis offer such a tool. To answer the ‘how’ type of question, it is necessary to specifically and explicitly interpret the powers, the expressions, and languages that construct the expression, and discourse analysis offer such a tool. The following sections will explain in detail, how and why the methods are used to study three cases through the three analytic lenses.

3.2.1. The Analytic Lens of *Equality and Principally Inclusiveness* Institutional Criteria

This analytic lens draws on the notions of equality and inclusiveness by focusing on the power relations between different net-users in the online political communications from two perspectives.

Firstly, it examines the regulations of the websites on which the debates are take place. This is important because the regulations define the rights and obligations of their users, i.e. what kind of rights are given to what kinds of

users?; whether or not all users share same level of accessibilities to the sites?; and whether all users are given the same level of expressive rights?. The answers to these questions will help to ascertain how equal and inclusive these websites' fundamental architectures are.

Secondly, the research investigates how participants on the websites perceive the power relations between themselves, and the extent to which such perceptions reflect the equality and inclusiveness of the debates they participated in. It is an in-depth analysis, because inside each website, it is still up to individual users to interpret the regulations and to conduct actual debates. It is through those actual debates that power relations can be practically established and engaged with; and it is also only through those actual debates that it is possible to discuss whether the power relations among the participants are equal and inclusive or not.

In regard to these two aspects, the research pays particular attention to Sina Microblog's regulations because it found that debates on Sina could be conducted using the real status of net-users through its real-name recognition VIP system (for example A is real-name recognised as a writer/script-writer; CCRN and 21st CER are recognised as non-party media organisations, as all of them are categorised by Sina as VIP users), unlike on Tianya BBS where debates are conducted anonymously. Anonymity is a distinctive feature of online communication and its importance has been explored in other academic studies, as reviewed in Chapter 1. Less attention has been paid to equality and inclusiveness in the context of platforms like Sina, where real status is used, and to the new dynamics and characteristics of these online political communications. As this is a relatively new phenomenon and is likely to become increasingly significant, it is important to evaluate it.

3.2.1.1 Regulation

This research selects Sina Microblog Community Convention to analyse, because it is the foundational regulation in Sina. To analyse this piece, this research will apply discourse analysis as a tool. The aim of this analysis is to understand how the regulations define power relations between individuals. While the language used to write such regulations are the medium through which those powers and power relations are constructed, expressed and conducted. Gee (2014:7-8) argues that languages are structured by different groups with different interests and needs, and that people are seeking to ‘gain’ or ‘give’ ‘social goods’ in or through the use of particular discourses. It is a process in which certain groups gain while other groups might ‘lose’ or be ‘denied’ in discourse. On Sina, the use of particular discourses in this Convention, defines what kind of powers its users can gain or lose, and whether or not certain users can gain more power than others. So analysing the discourse of regulation is a means by which to deconstruct such powers, to find out how Sina has regulated its platform in a way that gives (or does not give) equal and inclusive rights to all.

In analysing Sina’s regulations, this research firstly sought to determine how Sina defines the powers of and relations between VIP and non-VIP users *in* the discourse. This involves analysing the ‘contents, relations and subjects’ in the discourse (Fairclough, 2001: 38), in terms of what is said or done about VIPs and non-VIPs, what relations they each ‘enter’ (Fairclough, 2001: 39) in discourse, and what positions they ‘occupy’ (ibid) in the regulations. The analysis of power *in* the discourse is an essential step towards analysing the power *behind* the discourse, in terms of how such definitions of power *in* the discourse could impact on or reflect the actual power relations among Sina users. In the case of Sina users, the research set out to ascertain whether or not the already powerful, such as a famous writer or a newspaper, are able to ‘maintain their power’ (Fairclough, 2001:31) through the regulations, and

how such constructions of discourse contribute to or limit the equality and inclusiveness of the debates.

The specific analytic tool this research applies combines Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The reason for using this combination is because it offers a comprehensive tool, which ‘begins with SFL, and is extended by CDA’, and together demonstrate ‘the roles that language plays in exerting, reflecting and reinforcing power’ (Young and Fitzgerald, 2006: 23). SFL helps to explain power *in* discourse, and is conducted before CDA to offer a more ‘objective’ approach to the analysis of discourses (Young and Fitzgerald, 2006: 16). SFL identifies the *actors*, *goals*, *processes*, and *circumstances* in the discourse, so ‘who and what is involved in different.... actions and different states’ (Young and Fitzgerald, 2006:16) can be indicated. The *actors* are those participants who are ‘doing action’ in the discourse, and *goals* are those who are ‘being acted on’. The actions between *actors* and *goals* are referred to as *process*, and *circumstances* ‘describes the when, where, and how of *process*’ (Young and Fitzgerald, 2006: 16). By identifying them, the SFL offers a description of the power relations among different participants, and indicates how powers are enacted, and how relations are realised, *in* discourse. When applying SFL to Sina Microblog’s Community Convention, this research specifically questions how both VIP and non-VIP users are featured in the texts?; are they feature as *actors* or *goals*?; what positions and actions each of them have been given in the discourse?; and how the relations between are constructed?.

Following the application of SFL, CDA is used to explain the power *behind* the discourse because it ‘highlights inequality that is expressed, produced, and reproduced through language’, and helps to ‘expose misrepresentation, discrimination, or particular positions of power’ (Young and Fitzgerald, 2006:8). Using the SLF analysis as evidence, CDA is then used to interpret what powers VIPs and non-VIPs could gain or lose through this practise of

language. The research seeks to establish: whether or not their rights to access and express are equally and inclusively given; how the definitions of roles and powers in regulations could impact on the equality and inclusiveness of the sites; and how this regulation might contribute to or limits the structure of the online public sphere in China.

3.2.1.2 Cases

Following an examination of the regulations, the two Sina cases, namely, the debates prompted by Writer A's microblog about the Chinese versus the American system, and CCRN's and 21st CER's posts about Kunming's plans for an oil refinery, are analysed. The primary purpose of this analysis is to understand peoples' perceptions of power relations in online political debates. The analytic tool used combines content and discourse analysis, because the approach this research takes within this analytic lens cannot be solely achieved through one method. To understand net-users' perceptions of power relations, the discourses that are used to construct power relations need to be examined, in similar manner to the analysis of the discourses of regulation. But as it cannot be generally concluded that all posts in the two cases talked about the power relations between VIPs and Non-VIPs, so content analysis is applied before discourse analysis in order to systematically measure whether or not participants of the two cases mentioned and discussed VIP and non-VIP users in their debates, and if so, how often, and what powers they are associated with in the posts. When the specific texts that contain this information have been identified and measured through content analysis, discourse analysis can then be applied to look specifically into the text, to show power *in* and *behind* the discourse that reflect the equality (or inequality) and inclusiveness (or exclusiveness) of the debates. By using this combination, both objective measurements can be obtained and specific interpretations drawn.

Through content analysis, this research firstly calculates the numbers of VIP and non-VIP users in the two cases who participated through posts, comments and retweets. This calculation is based on Sina's own criteria: if Sina gives one user a VIP mark, this user is placed in the VIP category, and vice versa. After this calculation, the research then counts the frequency of occurrences of three codes: 'VIP users (大 V/VIP/加 V)', 'media (媒体)' and 'Non-VIP users (不加 V)', in the two cases. The code 'media' is used because the Kunming case shows that media organisations like CCRN and 21st CER are also categorised as VIP users by Sina, and those media VIPs were key players in political communications about the proposed refinery in Kunming. In order to measure the extent of their contribution, a sub-type of VIP users is introduced.

Next, the types of power associated with the three codes are further coded into 4 categories of power associations to assess whether or not extra powers are associated with VIP or non-VIP users, when individuals talk about them. Those extra powers include:

- 1) The power to dominate the debate, through one group's opinions being presented as representative of 'public opinion', and therefore other groups cannot challenge them;
- 2) The powers to silence other groups' opinions, or to squash opinions that are different or oppositional;
- 3) The power to select which opinions can be presented in the public domain, while which one should not be presented;
- 4) The power to invite certain individuals into the debate, while excluding others by blocking their access;

Based on the data collected through content analysis, this research then discusses whether equality and inclusiveness between VIP and non-VIP users have been constructed in the debates or not, how might the construction

reflect people's understanding of power relations in political communication, and what the possible impacts are on the construction of the online public spheres in China.

After this, exemplary posts from the two cases will be analysed using SFL and CDA. SFL is used at first to identify the *actors, processes, goals and circumstances* of the discourses, in order to outline the power *in* the discourse in terms of who is acting on whom, through what means. This enables the research to establish how positions are occupied by VIP and non-VIPs, and the relations between them. Following this, the analysis is extended to a discussion about the extent to which the construction of power between VIPs and non-VIPs *in* the discourse reflects the power relations *behind* the discourse in the online public sphere. The research asks how the actions, positions and relations in the discourse demonstrate the powers of the participants who expressed them, and whether and how those discourses can be regarded as contributing to the equal and principally inclusive institutionalisation of the public sphere; if in the absence of these characteristics, the research considers how inequality and exclusiveness are constructed.

3.2.2 The Analytic Lens of *Problematization of Unquestioned Areas* Institutional Criterion and *Expressional Political Function*

Problematization of unquestioned areas institutional criterion and the *expressional political function* seeks to establish whether or not individuals can problematize the Chinese government with regards to different public affairs, and then express these concerns in the online political communications in China. If so, what language is used to express these views and how they contribute to the problematization and expression of different political perspectives.

3.2.2.1 Examination of Whether or Not Individuals Can Problematize the Chinese Government

Content analysis will be applied in this examination, because it is a powerful tool to identify what have been said in the texts, by coding the content of the texts. Berelson (1952: 16,18) argues that content analysis offers a tool ‘process what-is-said’, which means it acts as a ‘research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication’. Bernard and Ryan (2010: 287) also suggest that by using content analysis, it is possible to ‘systematically code and analyse’ qualitative data, ‘to explore explicit and covert meanings in text’. By establishing key codes (such as words, phrases or themes) that reflect the issue under examination, and then identifying these codes in the texts, content analysis helps to generate a quantitative description of the text, especially through demonstrating the ‘frequency of occurrence of various characteristics of the content’ (Berelson, 1952: 20). Thus the occurrence of certain information and opinions can be proven.

By using content analysis, this research established two key codes ‘government [政府/ZF (short for zhengfu)]’, and ‘party (党)’, and calculated the occurrence and associations of them in the debates in the three cases. Tianya posts, microblog posts, comments and retweets were all coded. In terms of occurrence, these two codes help to identify whether or not individuals talked about the government in the debates, and if so, how often. Based on this, associations to the codes were then measured, categorised as follow:

- 1) What levels of government are associated: national, local, foreign or non-specific;
- 2) What roles are associated: as governors, leaders, or with negative indications (such as corrupted, incapable);

- 3) What issues are associated: particular policies, the overall political regime, or international issues.

These associations are made according to the three types of contentious debates that this research identified in the literature review. As previous academic studies indicate, through those contentious debates, Chinese net-users can problematize local government with regards to particular policies, discuss the national government with other individuals holding different agendas, and criticise international and domestic governments in online nationalism. By using the above three associations, this research tests those indications in the empirical research. It particularly discusses whether or not individuals have the opportunity to publicly problematize the Chinese political regime, including the role of the national government, the CCP and the political system. This is often regarded as unlikely to occur in China's online political communications although some Chinese individuals do hold concerns about the system, and this research tests such a regard. Secondly, as suggested by previous studies, individuals could problematize the government, especially the local government, when expressing their needs with regards to particular domestic policies. This research tests this regard, then enriches it by quantifying in what terms local government is problematized, whether or not national public authorities are also problematized in the debates, and if so, with reference to what kind of issues and what concerns are expressed. Thirdly, as reviewed previously, when expressing concerns about China's national interests, some net-users regard China's domestic government as powerful leaders or protectors while others accuse them of being incapable of dealing with the issue. This research engages with this debate to discover in the empirical research whose claims are valid. It also examines how is the domestic government mentioned in debates, and what concerns are expressed towards it? It then discusses the findings in terms of the implications for the structure of the online public

sphere in China.

3.2.2.2 Language Usage

Following the measurement of whether or not and what-is-said about the Chinese authorities, this research combines content and discourse analysis to assess how language is used in expressions and problematizations. As was suggested in the previous chapter, a ‘sensationalist’ and ‘abusive’ tendency can be observed in China’s online political communications, in which Chinese net-users engage in linguistic violence to attack, humiliate, and abuse other net-users and the public authorities. The few scholars who have investigated this tendency suggest that linguistic violence serves functions and creates political effects for online political communication. This research takes this argument further by discussing how exactly linguistic violence is used and how it may contribute to the structure of the online public sphere.

Firstly, it identifies and measures particular abusive words, how frequently they are used and who the targets are. Abusive terms are identified because they are the most direct formats of linguistic violence (Andersson and Trudgill, 1990), so by locating them, it is possible to locate texts with linguistic violence. To do so, this research used content analysis and the accordance for codes is the document ‘Ranking of Low-Taste Words on the Internet 2014 (2014 年网络低俗词语排行), published by the People’s Daily on 2nd June 2015, as a part of the 2015 People’s Daily Survey Report of Vulgar Using of Language on the Internet. This official document lists the 25 terms considered to be the most frequently used abusive words in online debate in China. The 10 most used terms in the list according to the official survey are used to code the posts, comments and retweets in the three cases, to see whether Chinese net-users have indeed used these abusive terms frequently in their political communications. The research does not intend to prove or otherwise that these 25 words are the only abusive terms used in debates, but

rather, uses them as representing a group of frequently used ones.

Once frequency has been measured, this research identifies who or what are the targets of the abusive language, in other words, who (or what) is being attacked through linguistic violence. The five categories used to code the targets are:

- 1) local government
- 2) national government
- 3) foreign government
- 4) government with no specification
- 5) individuals
- 6) organisations

The data collected is used as the basis for a discussion about how linguistic violence helped problematization of unquestioned areas, and expressions of concern.

Discourse analysis – both SFL and CDA - is used to determine exactly how violence is used when individuals try to problematize unquestioned areas, and what effects they achieve. By using SFL, this research firstly identifies the *actor*, *processes*, *goal*, and *circumstance*, in the discourse. This helps to outline how linguistic violence is involved in the expressions, i.e. is it used to refer to *actors* or *goals*, conducted as *processes*, or others. Then CDA is used to question what the discourse means to the debated topic, by associating it with the context and nature of the debated concerns. This will help to interpret: the function and effects of linguistic violence for political communication in the online public sphere; the kind of positions individuals can occupy; the kinds of power they can gain (or lose); and kind of relations they can establish through using linguistic violence. Through CDA, the following questions are addressed:

- Is it the case that individuals gain the power to problematize public authorities through linguistic violence, or it is the case that individuals' power to question have been denied?
- Does linguistic violence contribute to the expression of opinions which may not be able to be expressed otherwise? And what does this mean for online political communication in the online public sphere in China?.

3.2.3 The Analytic Lens of *Corresponding Political Function*

The third analytic lens used from public sphere theory to investigate government actions with regards to online political communications is the *corresponding political function*. This includes examining government regulations and assessing possibilities of engagement and responses.

3.2.3.1 Regulations

Examining the regulatory framework helps to understand the context in which online debates are located. As this area has been well developed in previous studies, this section will be relatively brief. Three documents are analysed: Sina Microblog Community Convention, Tianya BBS Users Convention, and the National People's Congress Standing Committee's Decision on the Safeguarding of Internet Security (2000). The key code 'information (信息)' is used to locate clauses in these three documents that specifically discuss online information. The identified clause is then outlined in order to find out what information is defined by the government as sensitive or harmful, and what procedures are proposed to control and censor that information. The research then asks: who is empowered by those definitions in the regulations, the net-users or the government; how those empowerments are constructed in the discourse; and what this means for the structure of the online public sphere

in China. The regulations are then related to the three cases to ascertain the level to which the rules were enforced, and what this means for online political communication in China.

3.2.3.2 Kunming's Case

To discuss whether and how government engages and responds the online political communications, this research uses Kunming's case as the primary focus, because it is the only case with clear and direct government involvements. The Kunming mayor's microblog and three party newspapers are analysed. The mayor's microblog is studied from May 2013, when the account was opened, to December 2013. The People's Daily, Yunnan's Daily, and Kunming's Daily are studied from January 2004 to December 2013. 2004 is selected because the Kunming plan was first proposed in 2004 as part of the China-Burma oil/gas pipeline. December 2013 is selected as the end point because the online public debate about the plan was at its height between March and June 2013. Thus this annual year is used.

The number of reports regarding the proposed Kunming oil refinery in these four party media are counted, especially between April to June 2013, when the online public debate was at its peak. To identify those reports, the codes 'China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) Yunnan oil-refining factory/plan (中石油云南炼油厂/项目)/ CNPC 10-million-ton oil-refining factory/plan (中石油 1000 万吨炼油厂/项目)/ China-Burma Oil/Gas pipeline[中缅(缅甸)油气(输油)管] are used, which are the names of the oil-refining plant. The titles and the first paragraphs of the reports in the party media will be searched and analysed.

Then, associations of the codes are measured to categorize the reports in terms of whether they are associated with environmental protection (环境/环保), resources strategies (能源战略), the economy (经济), public/public

opinions(民众/民意), or Internet/net-users (网络/网民). These categories are established according to the features of the online debates around the plant. The Kunming plant contains both national government interests in terms of its energy strategy, and the local government's desire for local economic growth through industry. Alongside these interests is locals' concern about the environmental damage that would be caused and the use of online spaces as platforms to express this concern. Therefore, these different interests, needs and features of the debates are established as categories for coding. Such measurements help to establish: whether or not the party media talked about the oil refining plant; how often it was mentioned; through the use of what kind of images, and what aspects they try to associate the plant with. The research investigates whose interests towards the plant are foregrounded, what kind of government behaviours and attitudes are observed and what those associations mean for the *corresponding political function* of the online public sphere?

Once an overall picture has been drawn, this research looks at the information provided by the reports and microblog to identify what actions the government conducted or promised to conduct in engaging with and responding to public concerns over the plant, and whose interests are reinforced through those actions. It also examines the discourses in the reports and blog posts, to analyse exactly how the government portrays the plant once it has become a topic of debate online, and how the government talks about the relation between government interests and public needs with regards to the plant. It asks: whose interests and needs are reinforced, and who is empowered through the discourse; how do those discourses contribute to or limit the engagement and response from the government.

3.2.3.3 CAC Website and 2015 People's Daily Survey Report of Vulgar Using of Language on the Internet

The CAC website was used to analyse how the Chinese public authorities engage with and respond to online linguistic violence, as a whole. To conduct this analysis, the website's own search function was used. The word '用语 (language usage)' was inserted to locate articles on the website that specifically refer to language usage in online communications. This is a basic but essential step because it measures the number of articles focusing on this issue, and helps to draw an overall picture to ascertain whether or not this government organ has paid attention to language usage online and if so, how often they are published, and what they reveal about government's engagement.

The research then focuses on the 2015 People's Daily Survey Report of Vulgar Using of Language on the Internet, applying SFL and CDA to address the following questions:

- 1) When mentioning linguistic violence in online political communications, what positions does the public authority occupy? What are the positions of the net-users? How are they related?
- 2) Who has the power to define whether linguistic violence is negative or positive, to define its functions and effects, and how such definitions are made and enforced in the discourse?
- 3) Who has the power to define what should be done about online linguistic violence in political communications, and how such definitions are made and enforced?

These three questions enable the research to establish: how the public authority approaches online linguistic violence, what agendas they try to achieve through the approach, who they try to empower (the public authority or the individuals), and whose interests are enforced. The implications for the

structure of the online public sphere in China are then discussed.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has described the research design, which comprises three case studies, and applies the methods of content and discourse analysis to answer the research questions. The next three chapters are the empirical chapters that present the findings and discuss the results found by using the methods outlined.

Chapter 4. The Structure of *Equality* and *Principally Inclusive* Institutional Criteria in China's Online Public Sphere

Introduction

In the public sphere theory, discussions about *equality* and *principally inclusive* institutional criteria traditionally focus on accessibility to and power relations between, different participants in the public sphere. They question whether it is possible to disregard pre-existing social and political status in the public sphere so that individuals of any status, men or women, working classes or middle classes, famous or ordinary individuals, can take part equally in communications and whether their opinions can be equally and inclusively discussed without offering pre-determined significance to any groups, or to any concerns specific to one group.

When approaching the issue of equality and inclusiveness in the online public sphere in China, it is necessary to firstly draw an overall picture of online activities in this country. Statistics show that the issue of digital divide is still not low in China, with just above half of the population having access to the Internet. This already limits the level of inclusiveness and equality in China's online public sphere, since the sphere cannot reflect the opinions and concerns from half of the population who do not have access to it. But just because the digital divide exists does not invalidate discussions about the online public sphere, not only because there has been a gradual increase of net-users in China, but also because the power relations and actions of those who do go 'online' should not be neglected. Their relations and actions contribute to online political communication in China.

Based on a traditional but critical focus on the online public sphere in China, this research takes a very specific approach by focusing on the VIP system in

Sina Microblog. This system, as reviewed earlier in this thesis, is a newly emerging one and an increasingly important phenomenon in China's online political communications. The popularity of the Sina Microblog, and the existence of the VIP system on this platform raises a critical question when discussing the power relations between participants in China's online political communications and that is, when pre-existing status and identities are no longer anonymous and are even reinforced by online platforms, is it still possible to observe the *equality* and *principally inclusive* criteria of the online public sphere, and if so, how?.

To investigate the issues raised by the VIP system, this research has proposed two approaches: firstly, to analyse the regulations of the Sina Microblog, how it defines the rights and obligations of different types of users; secondly, to examine how power relations among participants are constructed by the participants themselves through discourse in political debates. The former helps to draw a picture of the overall context within which the political communications are located; the latter offers a specific perspective on how the relations are talked about, discussed and reacted to by individuals when exchanging opinions. Through understanding both the context and how people are acting within the context, this research discuss whether and equal and inclusive relations have been established and expressed.

This chapter presents the data collected through the content and discourse analysis, from Sina Microblog Community Convention, from Writer A's Sina Microblog, and from discussions around the Kunming oil refining plan in CCRN's, and 21st CER's Sina Microblog posts.

4.1 Equality and Inclusiveness in Sina's Regulation, and in the Public Debates in Sina

Through studying the regulations and exemplary cases in Sina, this research

has identified both structured aspects of *equality* and *principally inclusive*; namely, there is evidence that individuals are debating in a sphere where they can equally and inclusively access the opinions of others and express their own opinion. It has also identified the issues that limit the equality and inclusiveness. This section will present evidence in relation to the structured aspects of the two institutional criteria.

Overall, this research found that equality and inclusivity for all users to use the Sina Microblog for debate, regardless of whether they are VIP or non-VIP users, is stated in Sina's regulations. Such a context defines that all kinds of users can express their opinions equally on the same platform, and those opinions are inclusively and publicly available. Equality and inclusiveness are also reflected in the public debates, so that although users are categorised into VIP and non-VIP users, it is not the case that VIP users can pre-dominate the debates by using their VIP status, and it is not the case that VIP users can use their status to establish their opinions as a hegemonic voice. Rather, both groups can equally express their opinions in the microblog and opinions from both sides can be equally presented in the public domain. Also, both VIP and non-VIP users can challenge equally the opinions that they disagree with, regardless of who expressed those opinions, and regardless of status, all opinions can be challenged. This has enabled political communications to be equal and inclusive, in the sense that opinions can be equally expressed and exchanged, with no group having the pre-determined power to dominate the debate.

To develop the above argument, the next section analyses how Sina defines the basic right users are given in its regulations, through applying discourse analysis. Writer A's microblog post are also analysed using discourse analysis to ascertain how power relations between VIP and non-VIP users are constructed and reflected through discourse.

4.1.1 *Equality and Principally Inclusive* as Being Structured through Equal and Inclusive Rights to Use Sina Microblog in Regulations

Sina Microblog Community Convention is analysed, because it is the basic set of regulations for this platform, defines the basic powers, rights and obligations for all Sina users. It contains five sections and a total of 35 clauses. Section One (Clause 1 to 4) defines ‘what is Sina Microblog’, ‘what is microblog users’, and refers to the national legislative framework Sina’s Convention follows. Section Two (Clause 5 to 9), entitled ‘users’ rights (用户权利)’, specifies the rights users of Sina can enjoy. Section Three (Clause 10 to 21), entitled ‘standards of users’ behaviours (用户行为规范)’, defines what uses are encouraged, not encouraged and forbidden on Sina. Section Four (Clause 22 to 30) is called ‘management of the community (社区管理)’, and outlines the procedures with regards to enforcing controls over actions that are regarded as violating the regulations. While Section Five (Clause 31 to 35) to comprises ‘additional clauses (附则)’, and defines what Sina is not responsible for, and once again reinforces this Convention follows the national level legislation¹³.

In terms of defining powers, Section Two of the Convention is the most pertinent, since it specifically outlines the rights that different types of users are given. This research applies a combination of SFL and CDA tools to analyse the wording of this section. The standardised formula of SFL is applied to deconstruct the regulations by indicating its *actors*, *process*, *goals* and *circumstances*. The *actor* of a text, as argued in the methodology chapter, refers to the subject in the discourse that conducts the action(s); the action(s) conducted and the relations established by the *actors* are the *processes*; the *goals* are the objects that receive the actions; and the *circumstances* refer to the conditions of the *process*, such as when and where. The formula allows for an objective description of the discourse, enabling this research to identify

¹³ This is the 2016 version. Sina has updated the Convention in 2017.

exactly the powers that are associated with Sina users in this regulation, i.e. who are the *actors* engaged in the text, the VIPs or non-VIPs, or both; the positions that different users occupy; the actions they commit; the relations they establish; and under what circumstances they are established. CDA is then applied to analyse what those relations and associations in the texts mean, and how they reflect the actual rights and actions of Sina users, when they use this microblog.

To find out how users' rights and powers are defined (or differently defined between different types of users), SFL is applied to de-construct the 5 clauses in Section Two. The following five tables show the *actors*, *goals*, *processes*, and *circumstances* in each clause.

Charts 4.1 SFL Analysis of Five Clauses of Section Two in Sina Microblog Community Convention

Clause 5: Users enjoy the right to use microblog accounts. The right to use cannot be transferred or given by any means, and the accounts' behaviours will be regarded as the registered users' behaviours. (用户享有微博帐号的使用权。该使用权不得以任何方式转让，帐号的行为将被视为注册用户的行为。)

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| <i>Actors</i> | Users |
| <i>Goals</i> | rights, microblog accounts, rights to use, accounts' behaviours, registered users' behaviours |
| <i>Processes</i> | enjoy, use, cannot, be transferred, given, be regarded |
| <i>Circumstances</i> | any means |

Clause 6: The Sina Microblog site encourages users to carry out real-name registration, and to apply for special labels; the application process and the verifying standards are open and transparent. These types of users enjoy more

services. Special labels include: personal VIP recognition, microblog expert, organisational VIP recognition, microblog membership, and so on. (站方鼓励用户验证真实身份及申请特定标识，申请方式和审核条件公开透明。此类用户享有更多服务。特定标识包括：个人认证、微博达人、机构认证、微博会员等。)

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Actors | Sina Microblog site, application process, verifying standards, this type of user, special labels |
| Goals | users, real-name registration, special labels, open, transparent, more services, personal VIP recognitions, microblog experts, organisational VIP recognitions, microblog memberships, and so on |
| Processes | encourages, carry out, apply, are, enjoys, include |
| Circumstances | N/A |

Clause 7: Users' expressions on this platform cannot harm others' legal rights and benefits, cannot be in conflict with laws and regulations in use and with this Convention. (用户在本平台的表达不得侵害他人合法权益，不得与现行法律法规和本公约相冲突。)

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Actors | users' expressions |
| Goals | others' legal rights and benefits, laws and regulations, this convention |
| Processes | cannot, harm, cannot, be in conflict with, with |
| Circumstances | (on) this platform, in use |

Clause 8: Users' personal privacy is protected. Information regarding the verification of microblog users' real identification is stored in the third party's platform. Protection of users' privacy is microblog's fundamental policy, except when users expose themselves, or judiciary authorities require to

expose them according to legal process. (用户的个人隐私受到保护。微博的用户真实身份验证信息由第三方平台保存。对用户隐私的保护是微博的基本政策，用户自行公开、司法机关依照法定程序要求披露的除外。)

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Actors | users' personal privacy, information regarding the verification of microblog users' real identification, protection of users' privacy, users, judiciary authorities, |
| Goals | microblog's fundamental policy, themselves, them |
| Processes | is protected, is stored, is, expose, required to expose |
| Circumstances | (in) the third party's platform, except when, according to legal process |

Clause 9: When users' rightful benefits on microblog are harmed, it is possible to protect their rights and benefits through the microblog reporting function, or through legal procedures. (用户在微博的正当权益受到侵害时，可通过微博举报功能或司法途径维护权益。)

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Actors | N/A |
| Goals | users' rightful benefits, rights and benefits, |
| Processes | are harmed, protect |
| Circumstances | when, (on) microblog, it is possible, through the microblog reporting function, through legal procedures |

From the above description, it is possible to find that the term 'users' appears 10 times in the five clauses. This repeated appearance proves that the role of users is central in this section. Within these 10 appearances, the users are established as the *actors* 7 times (total 12 *actors*), and as *goals* 3 times (total 24 *goals*). When users are *actors* in the discourse, this means they conduct the actions; when users are the *goals* in the discourse, they are acted on. Thus,

being *actors* in the discourse can be regarded as more powerful than being *goals*, because *actors* are associated with the power to actively do things, while *goals* are given more passive positions, who are the recipients of the actions of the *actors*. For the above five clauses, users occupy powerful *actor* positions more often than being constructed as the less powerful *goals*. Such a construction reflects that this section talks more about what users can actively do in Sina, and talks less about what would be done to them.

The exact rights and course of actions that the regulation offers to the users are shown through the *processes* in the discourse. In the SFL analytic lens, *process* is the category that enables researchers to identify the actions of the *actors* and the relations between *actors* and their *goals*. In Charts 4.1 it is possible to identify the following 9 types of actions and relations that are actively associated with users:

1. To use the microblog account
2. Cannot transfer the right to use the account
3. To apply for special labels
4. To enjoy more services (only when having special labels)
5. Cannot harm others' rights and benefits, cannot conflict with laws, regulation and convention
6. To protect (or being protected) personal privacy
7. To expose personal privacy
8. To protect rights and benefits
9. To report, if rights and benefits are harmed

Within those 9 associations, 8 of them do not specify what type of users they are associated with, so 'users' refers to all Sina Microblog users who are registered with an account; while only one association is made with specific regards, and that is Clause six suggests users with 'special labels' can enjoy

‘more services’. The number means that in the definition of powers, the actions that are associated with all types of users are far more than actions that are associated with one specific type of user.

The above SFL description needs now to be expanded through applying the CDA lens, i.e. to link the *actors*, *goals* and *processes* inside the discourse with real players outside the discourse. Section 2 in the Convention defines the actions and powers that users are entitled to, upon registering with a Sina account. In these definitions, two types of users are established: one as ‘all the users’ in Sina, and one as users with special labels, which includes VIP users (personal and organisational), microblog experts, and memberships. The label of VIP users is most reinforced among those special labels, as it appears twice when Sina talks about special labels: one as personal VIPs and one as organisational VIPs.

Between all users and users with special labels, all users are given eight types of rights, and those rights are equally and inclusively associated with all of them. Within these eight types of rights, the right to ‘use’ Sina account is the first. To use the Sina Microblog, means as an account holder, a user can post microblog contents, comments, retweets and like other people’s posts, and access microblog content, comments and retweets that are open to view. Following these basic user, users also have the right to apply for labels, to protect (or being protected) personal privacy, to expose personal privacy, to protect rights and benefits, and to report, if rights and benefits are harmed. In addition to these eight fundamental rights that are given equally to all users, users with special labels are associated with one more action: to enjoy ‘more services’. Sina has phrased this one extra action as a ‘service’ rather than a ‘right’. The sense of ‘service’ is different from ‘rights’: ‘service’ suggests that people can enjoy additional benefits, while ‘right’ stresses the basic power that people are entitled to. By associating all users with more powers and phrasing the extra action carefully, Sina establishes a context in which all

users in Sina are given equal rights to use the microblog. So when they engage in a discussion, they are given equal rights to express their opinions by using the account, and all microblog posts, comments and retweets they post are inclusively shown on the Sina Microblog. Aside from these shared equal rights, users with special labels are offered more services, but the content of those ‘services’ is not specified in the Convention.

What this context brings to the structure of the equality and inclusivity criteria of the online public sphere is that Sina, as the most popular interactive platform in China, could be regarded as a central institution in the online public sphere in China. Such an institution is regulated to offer equal access to all its users, and to allow opinions to be equally and inclusively expressed and exchanged by all. Sina informs through its regulations that, as long as individuals have registered with a Sina account, they can enter into this arena, access other people’s opinions, express their opinions, and exchange opinions with others. Those basic but crucial rights are equally given to all individuals, and its VIP system does not impact on those basic rights. Thus, when political debates take place on Sina, the accessibility to publicly available information and other people’s opinions, the ability to express opinions, and the ability to debate with others, are equal and inclusive.

4.1.2 Equality and Inclusiveness as Equal and Inclusive Powers to Express and Exchange Opinions in Debates

Within the above discussed context, in principle, when individuals use the Sina Microblog to conduct debate, all individuals, regardless of who they are and what type of user they are, should be able to equally express their opinions and debate with others, rather than one type of user dominating the debate. The opinions of all types of user, as long as they are not censored by the public authority, should be able to be inclusively shown on Sina, without any opinions being established as the only one, or any hegemonic voices set up as

beyond challenge, or any opinions removed because they challenge one type of user.

This research found that such a context has indeed impacted on the actual debates on Sina Microblog. Although Sina categorises its users differently, some with special labels, some without, in actual political communication, the ability to express opinions, and especially the ability to challenge others, is given equally to all. Neither of the two types of users can make their voice the only voice in the microblog, but rather they can equally express their opinion by using posting, commenting and retweeting functions in the microblog, and their opinions can be equally and inclusively accessed and challenged by other individuals in the debate. It is possible to observe the structure of the *equality* and *principally inclusive* institutional criteria from the debates occurring on Sina.

An example from Writer A's microblog will be used to illustrate this. Writer A, as introduced in the methodology, is real-name registered and recognised on Sina as a personal VIP user. As a VIP user, A's pre-existing elite status, as someone famous, rich and well-educated to masters level, is given recognition. The starting point of the public debate that is the focus of this analysis, is a post published on 09/12/2012 in A's microblog suggesting that a babysitter in America can earn a lot. The author followed this up by arguing that everyone can make the 'American dream' come true through working hard¹⁴. A then posted another 10 blog posts in the next 13 hours to defend his opinions. The 11 posts received 1066 comments and 3689 retweets all together, and those comments and retweets were generated by 4671 non-VIP users and 84 personal VIP users. Those numbers indicate that both VIP and non-VIP users

¹⁴ In Chinese: 纽约好一点的保姆一年可挣 20 万美元, 你先过托福和 GRE, 找一学校申奖学金, 再早学生贷款, 利用上学时间再学点法语、学点各种运动, 接着去当保姆, 对主人忠诚, 对孩子有爱心, 这有什么难的? 任何一个人中国人只要想就能办到, 没有任何技术含量, 只是辛苦而已, 改变命运就这么简单, 死记硬背还无风险。Access though: <http://www.weibo.com/1191808911/z8VivsMEk>, Access on: 01/03/2013

engaged in this debate, and non-VIP users dominated in numbers.

The interactions between A and other users in this debate is the focus of this section, and to conduct a specific analysis of these interactions, this research focuses on the final blog post that Writer A made in this debate. This post is crucial for the analysis because it is a conclusive one in which A expressed his thoughts about the interactions and relations between him (as a VIP user) and others in the debate. The post says:

‘Before went out jogging, could not control hands, so clicked on the comments section. A sense of disappointment emerged like had played a zither to cows. The person I have mentioned is only used as an example to express my opinions, and have no intention to criticise or admire anyone — only slaves need to face those two totally opposite opinions. I mean, criticism or admiration imply a relationship between owners and slaves. But we are the people, who walk freely on the earth, talk about this and that, about all human life and enlightenment.’ (出门跑步前手欠点一点评论，一种对牛谈琴的失望涌上心头，我提到的人，只是用来当例子谈论我自己的想法，并没有丝毫批评或表扬谁的意思——只有奴隶才会面对那两种极端的意见，我是说：批评或表扬，那暗示着主人与奴隶的关系。但我们是可在整个地球上自由穿行的人啊，谈来谈去，谈的都是人生与启示啊。)

This is a post A used to express his opinions after reading the comments of this blog posts. To interpret the power relations that are constructed into the discourses, this research applies SFL and CDA to de-construct the text.

The chart below presents the results from the analysis:

Chart 4. 2 SFL Analysis of Writer A's Microblog Post on 9th December 2012

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| <i>Actors</i> | A sense of disappointment, I, slaves, I, criticism, admiration, we |
| <i>Goals</i> | jogging, hand, comments section, zither, cows, the person, example, opinions, intention, anyone, two totally opposite opinions, the relation between owners and slaves, the people, this and that, about human life and enlightenment |
| <i>Processes</i> | went out, cannot, control, clicked on, emerged, like, had played, have mentioned, is, used, express, have no, criticise, admire, need to, face, mean, imply, are, walk, talk |
| <i>Circumstance</i> | before, on the earth |

To understand the power relations constructed through this text, the analysis identifies the *actors* in the discourse as this indicates who has the power to actively take actions and establish relations, so by focusing on them, it is possible to identify who is more powerful (or powerless) and in what ways. In this post, there are 7 actors and among them, the *actor* 'I' is the most active, not only because it appears twice, while none of the other *actors* do, but also because it conducts 7 *processes* towards 5 *goals*, while none of the other *actors* conduct more than 2 *processes*. The next most active actor is 'we', involved in 3 *processes* and towards 3 *goals*. But the use of the term 'we' also implies a sense of belonging, as a group that 'I' is part of. So, when the *actor* 'we' is defined and takes action, 'I', as a part of 'we', is also potentially involved in those processes. Therefore, through this text, the power of 'I' is constructed as having the power to 'mention' persons, to 'use' examples, to 'express' opinions, to 'have' no intention, to 'criticise' and 'admire' anyone, and to 'mean'; and as part of 'we', 'I' has also been defined as 'people', and can 'walk', and 'talk' about human life and enlightenment. 'Slave', on the

other hand, as a human actor does not belong to the I/we, is less active. Because it only takes 2 actions: 'need to' and 'face'. 'I' is also the most powerful *actor* since among the 7 *actors*, only 3 of them are human: I, slaves, and we and among those 3, 'I' is the only *actor* with the power to define the actions and characteristics of other actors: it defines the 'slaves' 'need to face' 'criticism or admiration', and defines 'we' as people. 'Slaves' and 'we' by contrast, do not have the power to define the actions and characteristics of 'I'.

When the CDA lens is applied to associate *actors in* the discourse with the players *behind* the discourse, this research argues that the *actor* of 'I' in this text refers to A himself. This makes A the most powerful one. His power is not only constructed *in* the discourse, but also *behind* the discourse. This is because by posting this text, A expressed the consequences of actions: he clicked on comments, then disappointment emerged. This sense of disappointment he described as 'playing a zither to cows', which is an old Chinese saying suggesting that one is wasting kind words on someone who does not understand. This saying shows that when A clicked on the comments section, read the posts and encountered disagreement with his earlier post, A felt that what he had said in his posts has been wasted, leading to the emergence of disappointment. By expressing such a consequence of actions and relations, A cast himself as the zither player, the person with the power and the ability to express kind words, while those who disagreed with him or did not truly understand him were 'cows', which are inhuman. This reinforces the rightness of A's opinions, and incorrectness of his oppositions.

Nonetheless, what this discourse also shows is the equality and inclusiveness of the debate, because even though A has constructed himself as powerful and wise in the discourse, it does not change the fact that he has been challenged and disagreed with. A's opinions as well as those views that express disagreement are equally available and accessible on Sina: one could read A's opinions and the opinions of those who disagreed with him. A did not have

the power to make people listen to his 'kind words', and his disappointment did not lead to the removal of the disagreements; his remains simply one personal opinion among others. This shows that the debate that occurred in A's microblog was not based on representing A's opinion as the pre-determined significant one, but was based on inclusive exchanges of different opinions. The context of the Sina Microblog enables basic expressive rights to be given equally to all users, and this right enables them to equally and inclusively agree or disagree with others' opinions, rather than being passively represented by one opinion. So when A, as a VIP user, expressed his opinion, it was one opinion among others. His VIP status, although made visible, did not give A the power to dominate the debate by establishing his opinion as the only voice; it did not give him the power to silence or exclude opinions or people from the debate, nor to protect himself from being challenged. What he could do, just like all other participants, was to indicate what he thought and disagreed with, to defend his position, while waiting to see what others thought and how they responded. At the same time, those users who disagreed with A did not have the power to silence A either, or to speak on behalf of A; instead, all these opinions from all participants were inclusively and equally presented in the same arena which can be equally and inclusively accessed by all others.

The analysis of this debate shows how equality and inclusiveness of political communication contributes to the structure of the online public sphere: although the status of the VIP and non-VIP is established in the regulations and becomes the context when using Sina, and although the personal VIP A can construct himself as powerful, the fundamental power to express and especially, the power to challenge, is not impacted by status. Although VIP users enjoy more services, those services do not impact on the basic powers that are equally given to all; therefore, debates in this institution can be said to be based on the equal and inclusive exchange of different opinions, rather

than being dominated by personal VIPs.

In this section, the analysis has shown that Sina has created a context in which all users, regardless of whether they are VIP or non-VIP, have equal powers to express, to challenge, to communicate; and the opinions they generate through posts, comments and retweets are inclusively and publicly available on the Sina platform for other users to access. In such a context, both VIP and non-VIP users can actively engage in political communications around public affairs, and the opinions both groups generate are equally available. It should also be noted that the status of VIP users is disregarded in the sense that it does not confer extra powers to VIP users in terms of dominating public debate. VIP and non-VIP users equally express their opinions, face challenges, and challenge others. All those opinions and challenges are inclusively published on Sina.

4.2 The Limitations of Structure of the *Equality* and *Principally Inclusive* Institutional Criteria: Limitations in the Regulation and Construction of Power through Discourse

By focusing on Sina's regulations, and the relation among users in the actual debates, the previous section showed that positive contribution can be observed for the structure of the online public sphere, because a level of equality and inclusiveness can be seen. But this does not mean that political communication on Sina is totally equal and inclusive. Because although Sina offers fundamental rights equally to all users, the establishment of VIP users, categorises and reinforces different statuses between people. Reference to these differences are made in the regulation, and are picked up on by individuals in the political communications. Particularly in debate, VIP users

have been constructed with the power to be able to represent public opinion, and to speak for the public when debating with the government. Opinions generated by VIP users are given pre-determined significance by non-VIP users. So while this does not mean opinions from non-VIP users are excluded from the debate, opinions from VIP users are valued more, rather than the opinions of all types of users being equally and inclusively valued. Such value is not determined by the contents but rather through association with pre-existing status, which means the status of VIPs is not entirely disregarded in the political communication. Such a construction has created a certain degree of inequality in the online public sphere which needs to be recognised. The following two sections elaborate on the above findings.

4.2.1 Limited Equality and Inclusiveness in the Regulations

In the previous analysis of the regulatory clauses in the Sina Microblog Community Convention, the regulations were found to define the basic rights as given equally to all types of users. At the same time, they encourage users to apply for special labels by promising more services; however, they do not define what type of user can have what type of label, nor do they define what the ‘more services’ are beyond the basic rights. This research found that these two issues are addressed through a hyperlink provided in Clause six to the allocated service page for the application of special labels. The service page stipulates that all users can apply for Sina Microblog ‘expert’ and ‘membership’ status, two of the special labels, if they offer real-name registration and pay a fee. But only certain people and organisations can become VIPs, and they are celebrities, social and political elites, or pre-established organisations, such as media organisations, whose pre-existing status is recognised as worthy of personal or organisational VIP status. Sina

also lists the four extra services given to VIP users¹⁵. It suggests that a special VIP label will be given to recognised users, which is not only more 'identifiable' but also offers 'prior positions (优先)' when showing research results. Secondly, VIP users can use the microblog page to demonstrate personalised professional and personal interest. Thirdly, multiple interactive formats are established among VIPs and their 'fans' (粉丝)', and this will help users to promote themselves. Finally, VIP users will be put into the 'House of VIPs' (名人堂).

Such regulations do not impact on the right of either type of user to participate in debate, but they do reinforce pre-existing status, rather than disregarding it. Because participants of online debates on Sina are thus labelled differently according to their status, and those labelled statuses become an acknowledged context for political communication on this platform. Those who already demand more social and political capitals, can transfer their offline social status to the online arena. For example, many pre-established and mainstream media organisations, such as the two most powerful party media organisations, The China Central Television and People's Daily, have chosen to be recognised as organisational VIP users. They use the organisational VIP label to announce their status, and rely on their already established resources and reputation to attract public attention, in order to expand their dominance from offline to online.

The four extra services are not in conflict with the basic powers that have been given to all users on Sina either, because the pre-condition for those four services are the eight fundamental rights given to all users, namely, the equal right to access and express opinions, and the inclusive availability of all sorts of opinions on Sina. Despite having those four extra services, VIP users cannot dominate the political communications, as they are not given the

¹⁵ Access through: <http://verified.weibo.com/verify/help?fr=personal&frpos=leftnav>,

Access on: 25/08/2015

power to exclude or silence others' opinions, nor to exclude other non-VIP users from engaging in the debate. Instead, the powers offered to the VIP users through those extra services, are first of all, being recognised with the VIP status, and secondly, increased influence. In terms of recognition, Sina suggests that VIPs will be listed in the 'House of VIPs'. This kind of 'House' reinforces categorisation, and the category of VIPs is specifically reinforced by bestowing the 'privilege' of being included in the 'House', while there is not such a thing to list non-VIP. This kind of reinforcement of status creates exclusion and inequality, not only by excluding non-VIPs from the 'House', but also by the sense of importance that is created towards the VIPs against the less important non-VIPs. This extends the powers of the already powerful, i.e. those celebrities, social and political elites, and organisations, who are recognised as VIPs from the offline arena to the online one. Thus, when debating on Sina, they are able to claim their status as a 'very important person'.

In terms of having more influence, Sina promises that by becoming a VIP, users will be given 'prior' position in search results. So, when users search for certain information or opinions around certain issues on Sina Microblog, Sina shows posts, comments and retweets generated by VIP users in more advanced positions than those from non-VIP users in the search results. Thus, opinions from VIP users will be listed prior to those from non-VIPs: when other individuals access a public debate around a certain issue, the VIP's opinions will appear first and therefore stand a much higher chance of being read, and be taken as the public opinion around the specific issue. This function does not violate Sina's own regulations because all opinions from both VIP and non-VIP users are inclusively available on the platform and can be accessed. But visibility and accessibility to the information is not equal. Opinions from VIP users are offered with pre-determined significance to be visible and accessed in advance, not because of what has been said, but rather

because of who has said it. Particularly given that VIP users are invariably individuals and organisations that are already powerful and influential offline; by offering their opinions prior position, these powers are reinforced and expanded, while the voices of those who are already less powerful and less influential are left behind, so that the equality of political communication is undermined.

The analysis shows that in the construction of power relations through the regulations, Sina creates a context in which the fundamental right to debate is equal and inclusive, so all individuals can engage in political communication, contribute and exchange their opinions, regardless of their status. But beyond this basic level of equality and inclusiveness, inequality and exclusions exist. People are categorised per their pre-existing status. Status reinforces the pre-determined significance of certain opinions and allows already powerful social and political elites to transfer their powers from offline to online. When this reflects towards the *equality* and *principally inclusive* institutional criteria of the online public sphere, this means status has not been totally disregarded on the Sina platform; instead it enables certain people to act upon and rely on their status to gain more influence in political debates, as their opinions will be accessed more than those of others with no status. This limits the extent to which Sina, as an important institution in the online public sphere in China, can claim to be equal and inclusive.

With such power relations established in the architecture of the platform, users of Sina Microblog are competing their opinions in an arena with categorisation and status, which potentially impacts on their perceptions of power relations in the debates. The next section will thus move to examine debating in such an arena, how individuals' perceptions of the power relations between VIPs and non-VIPs are constructed through the content and discourse used in debates, and how such perceptions reflect and impact on the actual power relations between the two categories of users. It is possible to

assess power relations through the content and discourse generated by users, because when certain individuals are said to have more power than others, those powers are constructed through discourse. The accumulation of those discourses and contents with regards to such powers, become a reflection of public opinions towards those power relations, and can potentially influence the actual construction of such power relations in future debates. Therefore, analysing them will lead to further interpretation of how the reinforcement of VIP status limits the structure of *equality* and *principally inclusive* of the online public sphere.

4.2.2 Reinforcement of VIP Status in Political Communication

To understand how individuals construct power relations between VIP and non-VIPs through the debating contents and discourses, this research takes the Kunming oil refining plant in CCRN's and 21st CER's microblog as an example. In the analysis, the focus is on how VIP and non-VIP users are mentioned and associated with respectively in the debate. Content analysis is applied firstly to identify contents that mention VIP and non-VIP users, and the powers associated with those two types of users in those contents. It will also analyse an exemplary text, using discourse analysis to show exactly how power relations were constructed through discourse. A combination of SFL and CDA tools will again be applied.

4.2.2.1 Content Analysis of Occurrence and Associations of VIP and Non-VIP Users in the Discourse

Two microblog posts in the CCRN and 21st CER about the Kunming oil refinery plant were analysed, with associated comments and retweets. Both VIP and non-VIP users engaged in the debates on 21st CER's and CCRN's microblog pages, either through microblog posts, or comments and retweets.

The two charts below show the numbers of participants:

Chart 4.3 Numbers of VIP and Non-VIP Users Participating in 21st CERs
Comments and Retweets

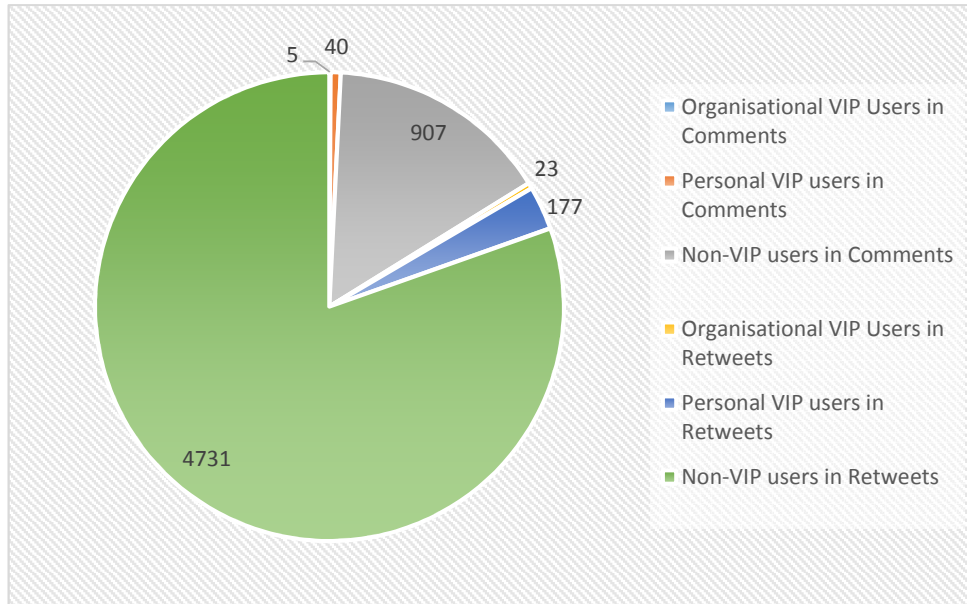


Chart 4.3 shows participation in the 21st CER's microblog page. 21st CER is a media organisation recognised by Sina as an organisational VIP user, and it is from this account that the blog post about the Kunming oil refinery plant was published. The post received 952 comments and 4931 retweets (data collected in January 2015, and re-checked in June 2016). Within the 952 comments, 5 of them were generated by organisational VIP users, 40 of them by personal VIP users, and 907 of them by non-VIP users. Within the 4931 retweets, 23 of them were generated by organisational VIP users, 177 by personal VIP users, and 4731 of the by non-VIP users.

Chart 4.4 Numbers of VIP and Non-VIP Users Participating in CCRN Comments and Retweets

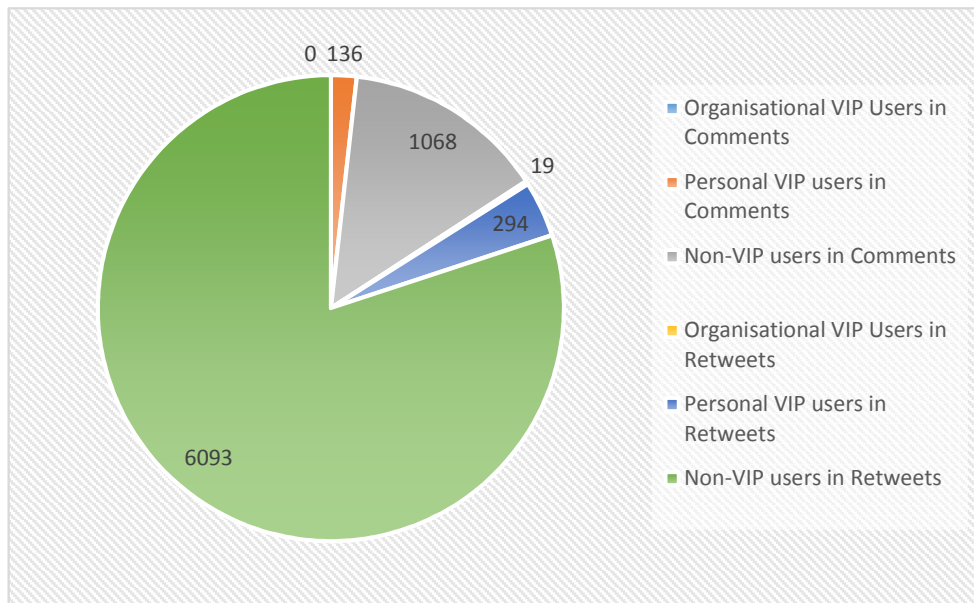


Chart 4.4 shows activities in CCRN, which is also a media organisation with organisational VIP status on Sina. The CCRN account posted the main blog and received 1204 comments, and 6406 retweets. Within the 1204 comments, this analysis did not identify any organisational VIP users, but found 136 personal VIP users and 1204 non-VIP users. The 6406 retweets were sent by 19 organisational VIP users, 294 personal VIP users, and 6093 non-VIP users.

These numbers show that both VIP and non-VIP users engaged in this debate, with highest participation of non-VIP users. This reflects Sina's basic architecture, namely, the right to use Sina in terms of viewing, posting, commenting and retweeting, being equally given to all registered users, as long as they obey Sina's and national laws and regulations. By having this equally given right, both VIP and non-VIP users engaged in the debates, to express and exchange their opinions, regardless of their status. The opinions generated by the two categories of users, VIP and non-VIP, were inclusively presented on Sina; so when the debate was analysed, it was possible to see opinions from VIP and non-VIP users, rather than only seeing engagement

from one side.

Content analysis was applied to the wording of the posts, comments and retweets. The analysis found the terms ‘VIP (VIP/大 V/加 V)’, ‘non-VIP (不加 V)’ and ‘Media (媒体)’ all featured in Sina users’ discussions about the Kunming oil-refinery plant. Among them, the word ‘media’, as a specific type of organisational VIP user that engaged in this debate, appeared with the highest frequency. The two charts below present the collected data:

Chart 4.5 Frequency of Codes ‘Media’, ‘VIP’ and ‘Non-VIP’ in the 21st CER Post, Comments and Retweets

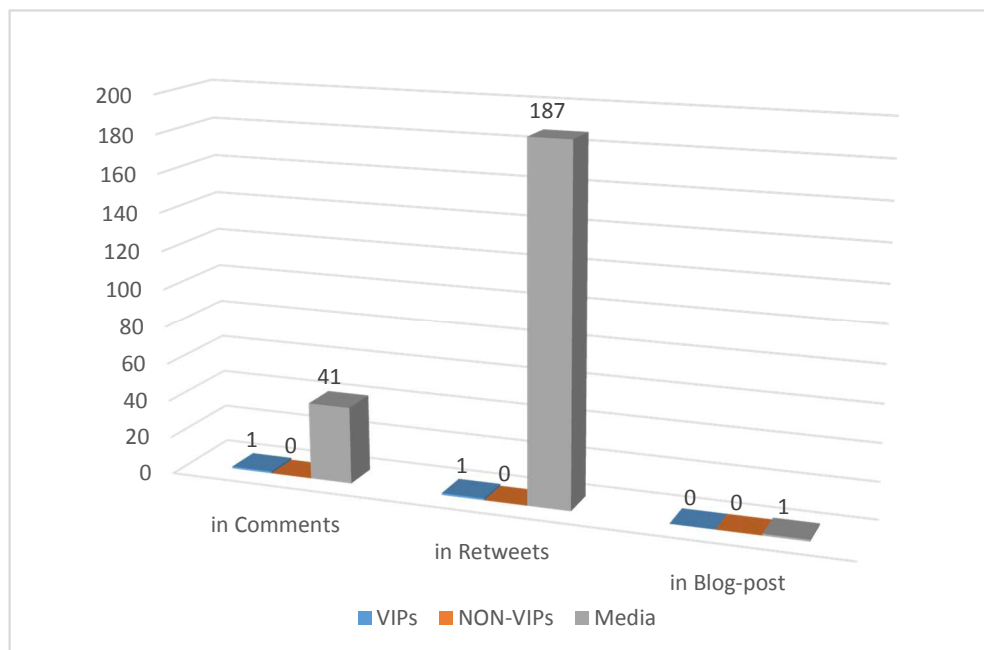
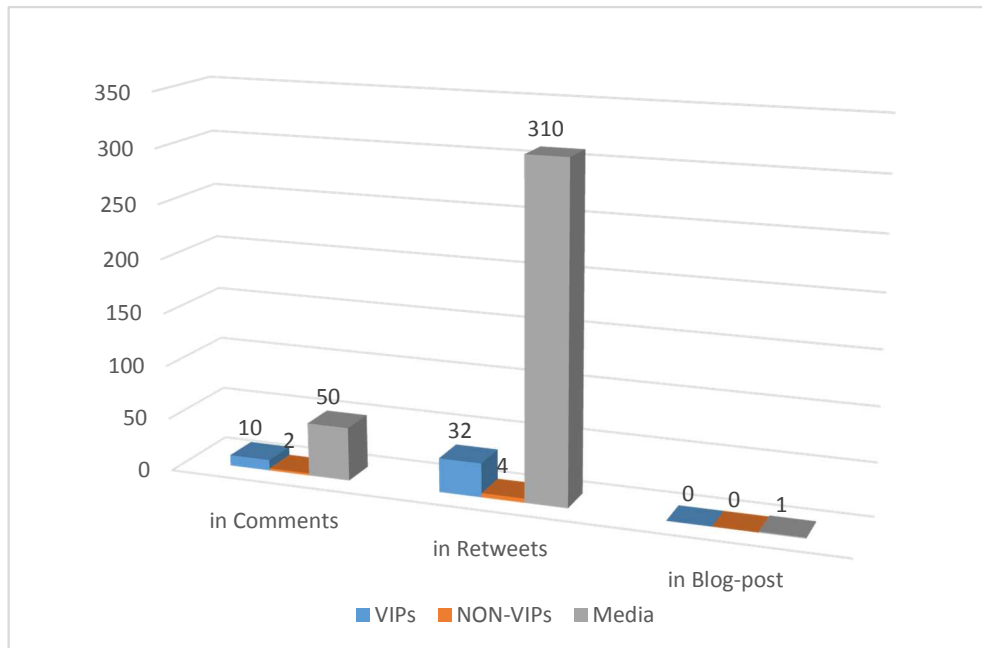


Chart 4.5 shows that the word ‘media’ was mentioned once in the blog post made by 21st CER, 41 times in the comments and 187 times in the retweets while the word ‘VIP’ was mentioned once in the retweets and once in the comments. Non-VIPs were not mentioned at all.

Chart 4.6 Frequency of Codes ‘Media’, ‘VIP’ and ‘Non-VIP’ in the CCRN Comments and Retweets



The word ‘media’ appeared 50 times in the comments and 310 times in the retweets, while ‘VIPs’ were mentioned 10 times in the comments and 32 times in the retweets. ‘Non-VIP’s appeared twice in the comments, and 4 times in the retweets.

These numbers show that in this context in which Sina has established the categorisation of VIP and non-VIP users, such categorisation is acknowledged and talked about by its users. The status of organisational VIP, especially media organisations such as CCRN and 21st CER, and the status of personal VIPs becomes an issue that is explicitly referred to in the discussions.

In order to find out whether powers are equally constructed or not in these debates, the research then studied what kind of powers, the organisational VIP status, personal VIP status and non-VIPs were associated with. The ways in which power is constructed can be varied, since there is not a formulaic way to define it. Thus, as suggested in the methodology chapter, rather than attempting to discuss all types of power that could be constructed, this

research illustrates 4 types of power that impact on the equality and inclusiveness in political communications as categories for codes. They are: the power to dominate the debate; the power to silence other people; the power to represent or exclude opinions, especially oppositional opinions; and the power to exclude or/and represent people in political communication. These types of powers are critical indicators because they show the most influential factors in terms of the equality and inclusiveness of political debates. If one individual or one category of individuals has the power to dominate, to represent, to silence, and to exclude other individuals or certain opinions, then it means they are empowered in the debates to only speak of their needs while those who are excluded and silenced are not heard. The power relation becomes unequal and exclusive.

To identify the 4 categories of power, this analysis uses a two-way identification system: firstly it identifies the words used in the text, and then it interprets the meaning at the level of the whole text. To identify examples of the power to dominate, the key words of ‘控制’ and ‘支配’, which are Chinese translations of the verb to dominate were highlighted. If the text contained these two words, the whole text was then read to ascertain whether power relations between VIP and non-VIP users were referred to or not. To identify the power to silence, this research looked for the key word ‘失声’ and ‘噤声’, and when these key words were identified, it again interpreted the meaning of the whole text. To identify the power to represent and exclude, this research looked for the key words ‘代表’ and ‘报道/不(无)报道’, and the meanings were then interpreted.

Using these categories and identifications, all the relevant texts in the 21st CER and CCRN’s microblog posts, comments, and retweets were analysed. The focus was only on the wording of the texts in the debates rather than on the people who authored the texts. In other words, the content of the texts are categorised regardless of who have made them.

The two charts below present the collected data:

Chart 4.7 Frequency of Associations of Codes ‘Media’, ‘VIP’ and ‘Non-VIP’ in the 21st CER’s Post, Comments and Retweets

| | 媒体(media) | 大 V(big Vs) | 不 加 V(non-VIP) |
|---|-----------|-------------|----------------|
| Power 1 To Dominate | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Power 2 To Silence | 39 | 1 | 0 |
| Power 3 To Represent or Exclude Certain Opinions | 46 | 0 | 0 |
| Power 4 To Represent or Exclude Certain People | 6 | 0 | 0 |

Chart 4.7 shows that in the posts, comments and retweets of the 21st CER microblog, the term ‘media’ and ‘VIPs’ were associated with at least 1 of the 4 types of powers, while non-VIP users were not associated with any of them. Between them, media organisations, as the main category of organisational VIP users, were associated with more powers (total 92 times), while VIPs were only associated once.

Media organisation VIPs are mostly associated with the power to represent or exclude certain opinions (46 times). When this type of power is associated with, the most talked about topic is the media organisations, especially those recognised by Sina as VIP users, who chose not to report/exclude news about the public’s environmental concerns around the Kunming Oil-refinery plant. When speaking of such exclusion, users often use the @ function in Sina to refer, identify and remind those organisational VIP media users who have not said anything about the plant, such as @YNTV 都市条形码 (one of the most watched local news programmes), @央视新闻 (Chinese Central TV News) or @云南信息 (Yunnan Information Reports, a non-party popular provincial

newspaper). Those media organisations were singled out and blamed for excluding opinions about environmental concerns, not only because they did not report them in their offline TV programmes or newspapers, but also because they did not engage with these concerns to represent public concerns in the online debate on the Sina Microblog. The fact that those media organisations have Sina Microblog accounts, and have claimed their VIP status on Sina means their failure to mention these opinions more visible to other participants in the debate.

This kind of text constructs the powers of exclusion and representation for organisational VIP users. However, this does not mean organisational VIPs can actually dominate the debate, and exclude or represent opinions from non-VIP and personal VIP users, since it is still possible to observe opinions, including criticisms towards VIP media organisation users, from the non-VIPs and personal VIPs on the microblog. Those powers mean that even though media organisation VIP users, non-VIPs and VIPs all have equal right to freely express or choose not to express opinions about environmental concerns over the oil refinery plant in Sina, the power of the media organisation VIP users to not include certain opinions are stressed and valued more. In order for participants in the debate to blame the media for excluding public environmental concerns from their reports, the media need firstly to be perceived by those participants as having the power to exclude information, and as having exercised this power. This powers to exclude also needs to be perceived as an issue of concern and require specific emphasis. Once these perceptions have been established, individuals then construct them through discourse. In contrast, this kind of power is not associated with non-VIP users, as if whether non-VIP users have or don't have the power to exclude certain concerns from the debate, and whether or not they exercise such power, is not worth mentioning. In other words, the powers of non-VIPs are constructed as insignificant. Such different constructions actually create inequality between

the two groups.

Chart 4.8 Frequency of Associations of Codes ‘Media’, ‘VIP’ and ‘Non-VIP’ in the CCRN’s Post, Comments and Retweets

| | 媒体(media) | 大 V(big Vs) | 不加 V(non-VIP) |
|---|-----------|-------------|---------------|
| Power 1 To Dominate | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Power 2 To Silence | 245 | 1 | 0 |
| Power 3 To Represent or Exclude Certain Opinions | 24 | 1 | 0 |
| Power 4 To Represent or Exclude Certain People | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Chart 4.8 shows that in CCRN’s microblog, media organisation VIP users are also associated with more powers, the most frequent being the power to silence (245 times). In this category, the most frequent wording was ‘all local media have lost their words (本土媒体集体失语)’ (196 times), as this was repeatedly retweeted. In this case, the power to silence is associated with the media, but the target of the silencing is the media themselves. This is stated and repeatedly referred to, indicating the deep concern felt by some participants about the power of media organisations, as they should have engaged in the political communication around the oil refinery, to speak for the public, but that they chose to remain silent with regards to local concerns about the environmental impact of the plant. In contrast, the silence of non-media users in this regard was not specifically mentioned, as if they are not in concerns. By expressing such concerns, the engagements from the media are valued more.

This research understands the local media in this text refers to media

organisations in general, including but not only, media organisation users on Sina. So, the power of the media that is constructed in this text pertains to media organisations in general rather than those that are VIP users on Sina.

What is not reflected in Chart 4.8, but is important to the understanding for the power relations between VIPs and non-VIPs is that in the CCRN's microblog posts VIPs (大 V, V) are referred to more frequently (42 times) than on 21st CER (twice). Among those 42 times, the text that appears most frequently is the following exchange: one user asks 'where is Yunnan's big Vs ? (云南的大 V 呢?)', and a VIP user answers that he 'has V' but "Yunnan's big Vs are too 'soft' (云南的大 V 都偏软)". This comment was then retweeted 8 times. While this exchange cannot be categorised into any of the 4 types of powers as it does not use any of the related codes, nonetheless, it is an example of powers being constructed in discourse, in this case, towards those of VIP users. The exchange begins with a question asks where are the 'Big Vs'. This reference to VIP users and the need for their engagement in the debate bestows a power on VIP users that is not given to non-VIPs, suggesting that their engagement is insignificant. In other words, the value given to engagement from users of the two groups is unequal, and the status of VIPs gives pre-determined significance to their participation in the debate. In the response, a VIP user reinforces his own VIP status, as if such a status is something worth mentioning, while none of the non-VIPs specifically do so. In the next section, this text is analysed using discourse analysis.

The analysis of the posts, comments and retweets in the debate around the Kunming oil-refinery plant found that the context of the debate can be regarded as equal and inclusive, in the sense that all users, regardless of their status, can and did express their opinion about public concerns, and those opinions were inclusively accessible on Sina. However, the status of the VIP was repeatedly reinforced in the debate, in that VIP status was associated with

more power in the discourse. VIP users' engagements are constructed with pre-determined significance, being more valued than non-VIP users, not because of the content but because of status, while (dis)engagement of non-VIPs is seen as too insignificant to mention. By perceiving power relations in this way, the power relations between the two groups with different status are unequally constructed. The already powerful social elites and media organisations are constructed as having more power, while the voices of the less powerful are less valued. The criteria of *equality* and *principally inclusive* are thus limited on Sina.

The following section provides further support for this argument by applying discourse analysis to the above-mentioned exchange on CCRN about 'Big V'. The post was chosen firstly because it was the most appeared text in the whole debate that directly used term 'VIP' (the text appeared 9 times and the term VIP was used 27 times in the texts). So, perceptions of power relations between non-VIP and VIPs are mostly reflected by this exchange. Discourse analysis is also needed because the post was not coded by content analysis but is nonetheless worthy of attention.

4.2.2.2 Discourses Analysis of Posts in CCRN Containing Key Code VIP (大 V)

The post for analysis is an exchange that occurred in the retweets section of CCRN's post on the Kunming oil refinery plant:

One non-VIP user asks '-Where are all those big Vs and public intellectuals?' (众多的大 V 公知哪去了?)

A VIP user answers "-On online platforms, 'big Vs and public intellectuals' in Yunnan are on the soft side. I have V, but is not big, I know a few things, but cannot reach the level of public intellectuals." (就网络而言, 云南的 '大 V、公知' 偏软。我有 V, 但不大, 我略知, 但不到公知的级别吧。)

Chart 4.9 deconstructs the exchange using the SFL lens:

Chart 4.9 SFL Analysis of Texts on CCRN Containing Code ‘Big V’

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| <i>Actors</i> | big V, public intellectuals, I, I |
| <i>Goals</i> | big Vs, public intellectuals, slightly soft, V, not big, a few things, the level of public intellectuals |
| <i>Processes</i> | are, are, have, is, know, cannot reach |
| <i>Circumstance</i> | where, on the online platform, in Yunnan |

From the above table, it can be seen that ‘I’, ‘big Vs’ and ‘public intellectuals’ are the three *actors* in this exchange, while ‘big Vs’ and ‘public intellectuals’ are also *goals* for the *actor* ‘I’. This means the key relation this text establishes is between I, and big Vs/public intellectuals. In this relation, the *actor* ‘I’ has been constructed as the most active and powerful one. Such powers are specifically shown as it is the only *actor* in the text that has the power to actively take actions. In the text, ‘I’ take actions through the *process* of ‘have’ towards the *goal* of ‘V’, and the *process* of ‘know’ towards the *goal* of ‘things’. This means by claiming ‘I’ ‘have’ the ‘V’ and ‘know’ ‘things’, the power to take actions is realised, and ‘I’ is empowered. This text also specifically mentions the *where circumstance* of ‘on the online platform’, which reinforces the place where all the *processes* take place. It is within the online platform, ‘I’ as the *actor* is empowered to take action. While big Vs and public intellectuals have no power to take action in the discourse, since in the exchange they are firstly asked where they had been, and then are defined as being ‘slightly soft’. None of those processes are actual actions.

When the CDA analytic lens is used, the ‘I’ is even more powerful, since the *actor* of ‘I’ is not only an *actor* in the text, but also refers to the speaker of this message, who is a personal VIP user. ‘I’ can make a statement to claim

VIP status and to take the action of ‘knowing things’, because a non-VIP user has asked ‘where are all those big Vs and public intellectuals?’. By answering this question, ‘I’ stresses the personal status, demonstrates its belonging to the VIP group, and defines the characteristics of the group.

This exchange once again reflects that VIPs are expected to engage and in this case, explicitly by non-VIP users, regardless of what they say. The fact that people ask where are the VIPs, but not the non-VIPs, suggests that VIPs are regarded as necessary for the debate and their engagement through voicing public concerns is more valued than non-VIPs’ engagement. This exchange also shows VIP status is something that can be specifically claimed and stated, and the *actor* who made such a claim is empowered through making this statement. This is because in the above SFL analysis, the *actor* ‘I’ realised its power in the discourse by claiming to ‘have V’. This means that VIP status itself rather than any specific actions/expressions determines the power of the ‘I’, so ‘I’, as a member of VIP users, is constructed as having a powerful and specific position, before expressing any opinions about the debated topic. More importantly, compared with this specifically required and stated status of VIP, none of the non-VIP users were constructed as having or constructed for themselves such powers. It is as if non-VIP users on Sina are not deserving of any attention; only someone recognised as a personal VIP gains status and this additional status can and is referred to explicitly. This extra status confers more power to VIP users, thus creating unequal power relations between the two groups.

To summarise, through content and discourse analysis of the posts, comments and retweets on 21st CER and CCRN, this research found Sina’s VIP system is acknowledged by its users and has become a crucial part in their expressions. With the emphasis on status, the structure of *equality* and *principally inclusive* on the online public sphere is limited in ways that does

not disregard pre-existing status, but rather, confers pre-determined significance to their participation. The opinions and engagements from the VIPs are expected and valued even before they have expressed anything, while non-VIP users are perceived as not as important, and engagements from them are too insignificant to mention.

But it should also be noted that the argument being made is not that power relations are unequal in terms of the basic rights to express and access information on Sina , but only that in discourse, VIP users are perceived as more powerful and as having a specific role. All kinds of users participated in this debate on Sina and all of them were able to equally and inclusively express their opinions and access other opinions. It is through those equally expressed and inclusively available opinions that this research was able to observe the discourse and identify the power of VIP users constructed in the discourse. VIP users are regarded by non-VIP users and even by themselves as powerful and influential. By emphasizing their status, VIP users hope to expand their influence, and non-VIP users hope VIP users will use their status to lead public debate, to expand the scope of communication, and to attract more public attention towards the debated issue. Thus, while the power to express opinions is equal and inclusive, the power to have an impact and to be valued are less than equal.

Chapter Summary

Sina is the most used interactive online platform in China; the fact that it has been widely used by individuals to engage in political communications makes it an important arena for any discussion regarding the structure of China's online public sphere. Although Sina is not fully representative of the whole online public sphere in China, it is nonetheless a central and major player.

Overall, the VIP system alongside other regulations governing Sina,

contributes on the one hand to the structure of *equality* and *principally inclusive* criteria of the online public sphere; on the other hand, it also imposes certain restrictions.

In Sina's architecture, the right to use the microblog to post blogs, to comment, and to retweet are equally given to all users. This has enabled a level of equality and principal inclusiveness to be structured. Upon this basic architecture, all Sina users have equal access to information on the platform, to express their opinions, and those opinions and information, as long as they are not removed by the monitoring system, are inclusively available to all. This also enables individuals, regardless of whether they are VIP or non-VIPs, to express agreement and disagreement, and to equally give voice to and access, oppositional opinions, rather than one side having the power to dominate the debate, or to exclude or silence oppositional/different voices. Opinions are thus equally expressed and exchanged, and positions are inclusively challenged.

What limits the structure of these two institutional criteria is that the VIP system in Sina promotes categorisation, which reinforces pre-existing status, encourages individuals to be regarded through those statuses, and allows the already powerful to expand their powers from the offline arena to Sina. The status of VIPs, both organisational and personal, as has been shown, confers special value to their engagements and pre-determined significance is given to them. Thus, although VIP users do not have the power to dominate debates, nor to silence oppositional opinions, their opinions and engagement in the debate can be regarded as more valued, and therefore powerful and influential than those of non-VIP users.

Taking into account both the promises and restrictions that are made on Sina, this research argues that while the criteria of *equality* and *principally inclusive* criteria have not been fully structured into China's online public sphere, nor are they entirely absent. Rather, what can be stated is that a degree of equality

and inclusiveness does exist in the sphere, but that the limitations need also to be recognised and critically analysed.

Chapter 5. The Structure of the *Problematization of Unquestioned Areas* Institutional Criterion and the *Expressional Political Function* in China's Online Public Sphere

Introduction

This chapter examines the structure of *problematization of unquestioned areas* institutional criterion and the *expressional political function* of China's online public sphere. These two elements are examined together because they relate to the same central question, and that is whether and how net-users express their concerns, by challenging and criticising the Chinese public authorities in political communication. *Problematization of unquestioned areas* criterion defines the public sphere needs to be institutionalised upon individuals' problematization of unquestioned areas; in ways, the meanings of what are the public concerns and how the concerns should be dealt, are self-determined by the public, not the public authorities. These self-determined concerns are expressed in the public sphere, informing the public authority of public needs and interests so the *expressional function* of the sphere can be realised. The examination of these two elements needs to encompass not only the content of the problematization, i.e. what opinions toward what issues are expressed to demonstrate self-determined public concerns; and the language used in expressions, i.e. what language is used to voice the opinions and how does language usage contribute to the problematization. Because both topics and language are equally important in the conceptualisation of the *problematization of unquestioned areas* and *expressional political function*.

This research has identified the contentious character of online political

communication in China, and argues that there are three main areas are mostly debated in contemporary China: firstly, debates over environmental issues between individuals and Chinese government; secondly, online nationalism in which contentious opinions are expressed towards both international and domestic governments; and finally around the Chinese political system among individuals with different political agendas. Guided by these types, three cases were selected to examine in more detail the content and language use in these debates. The aim is to find out what meanings of what concerns are self-determined, and through what ways issues are problematized in challenging the Chinese government. Then the research seeks to shed light on how those self-determined opinions and expressions contribute to or limit the *problematization of unquestioned areas* criteria and *expressional political function* as part of the structure of the online sphere. It also particularly focuses on the use of linguistic violence in contentious debates to discuss the function of such usage in terms of its contribution to the problematization of unquestioned areas and the expression of concerns.

The first part of this chapter focuses on the content of the problematization and concerns. It applies content analysis by using the codes ‘government (政府)/party(党)’ to code the posts, comments and retweets in 21st CER’s and CCRN’s microblog pages, in the debates around the Kunming oil refinery plant; and to code posts from Tianya BBS’s debates on the ‘purchase plan’ event in the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute between China and Japan. This section then shows what level of government, what issues, and what roles are associated, when the government is mentioned in political communications. It also interprets how those associations contribute to the problematization of unquestioned areas and expressions of concerns for individuals in this debate.

The second part of this chapter focuses on the language used in individual expressions, with specific attention given to how linguistic violence has been used. It will firstly use content analysis to demonstrate the frequency of

swearing words that have been used in individuals' problematization, and what they are associated with. It will then discuss how linguistic violence contributes to individuals' problematization of government behaviours by using discourse analysis. Microblog posts from Writer A, 21st CER and CCRN's will be analysed in this part.

5.1 Chinese Net-users' Problematization of the Government and Their Expressions of Concerns

This part discusses whether and through what ways, Chinese net-users problematize government's decisions and behaviours, and express their concerns in the online political communication. The discussion is based on data that collected from 21st CER and CCRN's microblogs, between net-users and the government around a domestic environmental event, and from Tianya BBS, regarding international issues. In total, 2 microblog posts, 2156 microblog comments, 11337 microblog retweets, and 1886 BBS posts were examined. Among a total of 15381 pieces of texts, the term 'government' occurred 1229 times, and the term 'party' occurred 172 times. These numbers demonstrate that Chinese net-users did talk about the Chinese public authorities in their debates with regards to both domestic and international issues. Both the government, as the governing organ of the country, and the party, as the ruling regime of the country, featured in the debates¹⁶.

The following two sections will interpret these numbers in detail in terms of the frequency of the two codes, broken down by the level of association, i.e. local, national, foreign. Then the roles that the government and party have

¹⁶ While Writer A's case, which is a debate around Chinese political system among people with different agendas, will not be discussed in this section, because in 2015, A has deleted all his 2012 and 2013 microblog posts, thus this research was unable to re-check the collected data. For the consideration of accuracy and creditability, quantitative data from A's microblog will not be used in discussions.

been associated with in discourse will be discussed, namely whether related with governors, leaders, or negative characterisation (i.e. being corrupted and incapable), and what issues they are associated with, namely, particular policies, the overall political regime, or international issues. Through this analysis, this research intends to draw a more detailed picture, which not only demonstrates that Chinese net-users are mentioning the government in online political communication, but also describes the level of government involved, the roles of government that have been problematized, and how those associations contribute to the expression of concerns in online debate.

5.1.1 Problematizing Government Decisions and Expressing Concern in Political Communications about a Domestic Environmental Event

Contentious debates between the Chinese public and the government over domestic environmental issues are important topics in China's online political communication. One example is the debate around the Kunming oil refinery plant on 21st CER and CCRN microblog pages. The central contention in this case is that the Chinese public authority and the Kunming locals define the meaning of the plant differently. The national government sees the plant as necessary and beneficial; and specifically, as a part of its national resources strategy to address China's resource shortage and transportation problem. The plant contains an oil-gas pipe that transports oil and gas from Burma to Kunming, and an oil-refinery factory in Kunming that refines oil locally to supply petrol usage in the south-west part of China with petrol. The local government regards the plant as economically beneficial for Kunming's local GDP growth, since it would produce not only petrol, but also sub-products, such as PX (Kunming Daily, 2010a: A8, Li, 2013a: 5, Shen, 2013:3, Li, 2012: 5). The government therefore confirmed the proposal to launch the oil-refining plant in January 2013. This decision was taken without seeking public opinion before going ahead with it, thus making the plant an

unquestioned area for the public. Members of the public, and Kunming locals in particular, were not given the right or opportunity to determine whether to have plant at all. Nor could they request more information about it, such as the environmental issues around it, before proposal was finalised.

Kunming locals began to find out more about different aspects of the plant in March 2013, when articles by environmental NGOs, non-party media, and independent authors began spreading on social media and online discussion sites, particularly Sina Microblog, warning of the environmental damage the plant would cause. They warned of the industrial discharge from the oil-refining process, and the toxicity of the PX production process to local waterways and atmosphere. The argument was made that the plant would impact the local environment and people's health. The articles were gradually censored and removed from online sites by the websites monitors, but not before Kunming locals and net-users had the chance to read the information. Many of them were influenced by these accounts and came to regard the plant not as necessary and beneficial, but as toxic and harmful for their health and for the local environment. They then used Sina as a platform from which to challenge the government's definitions and the decisions over the plant. A once unquestioned area, in terms of the meaning of the plant, the environmental aspects of the plant, and whether to have the plant or not, came to be therefore problematized, showing local concern about the issue.

The following analyses will show specifically how the issue was problematized by net-users to challenge the government, what the limits were to this problematization and through what ways they expressed their concerns. This is achieved by locating the codes 'government' and 'party', analysing the associations made with them, and then discussing the meanings of those associations.

Firstly, Charts 5.1 and 5.2 demonstrate the level of government referred to when the codes 'government' and 'party' are used.

Chart 5.1 Associations of ‘Government’ and ‘Party’ in 21st CER Microblog Posts, Comments and Retweets (Level of Government) in Kunming Refinery

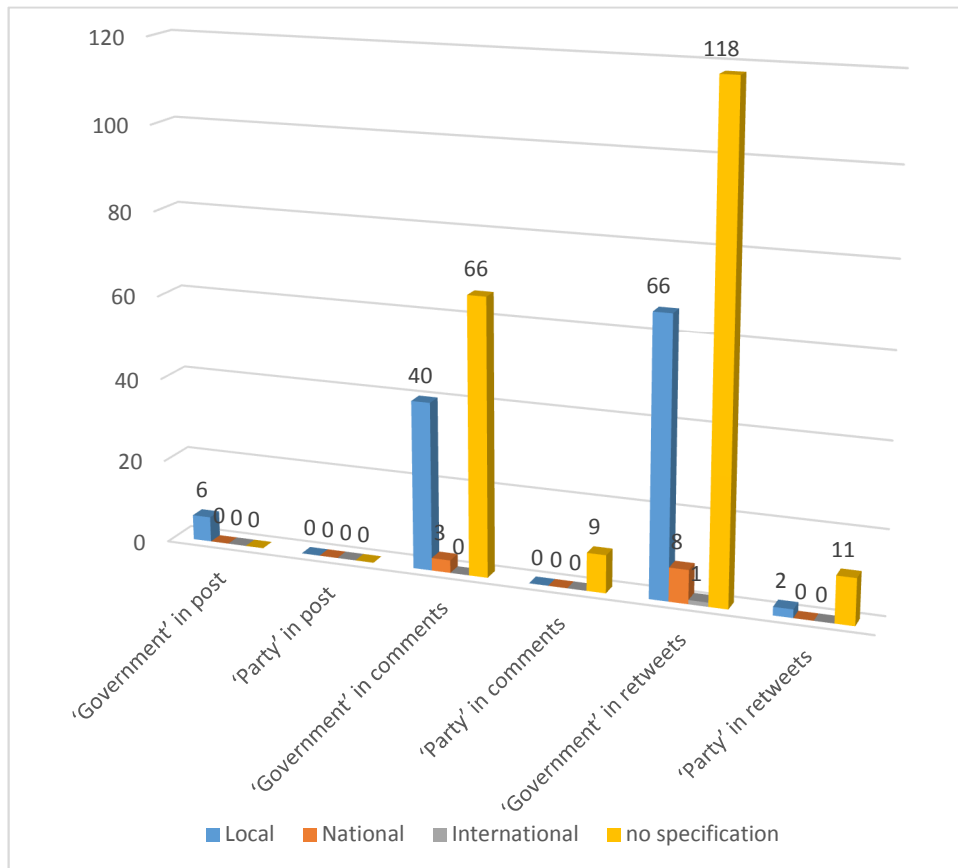
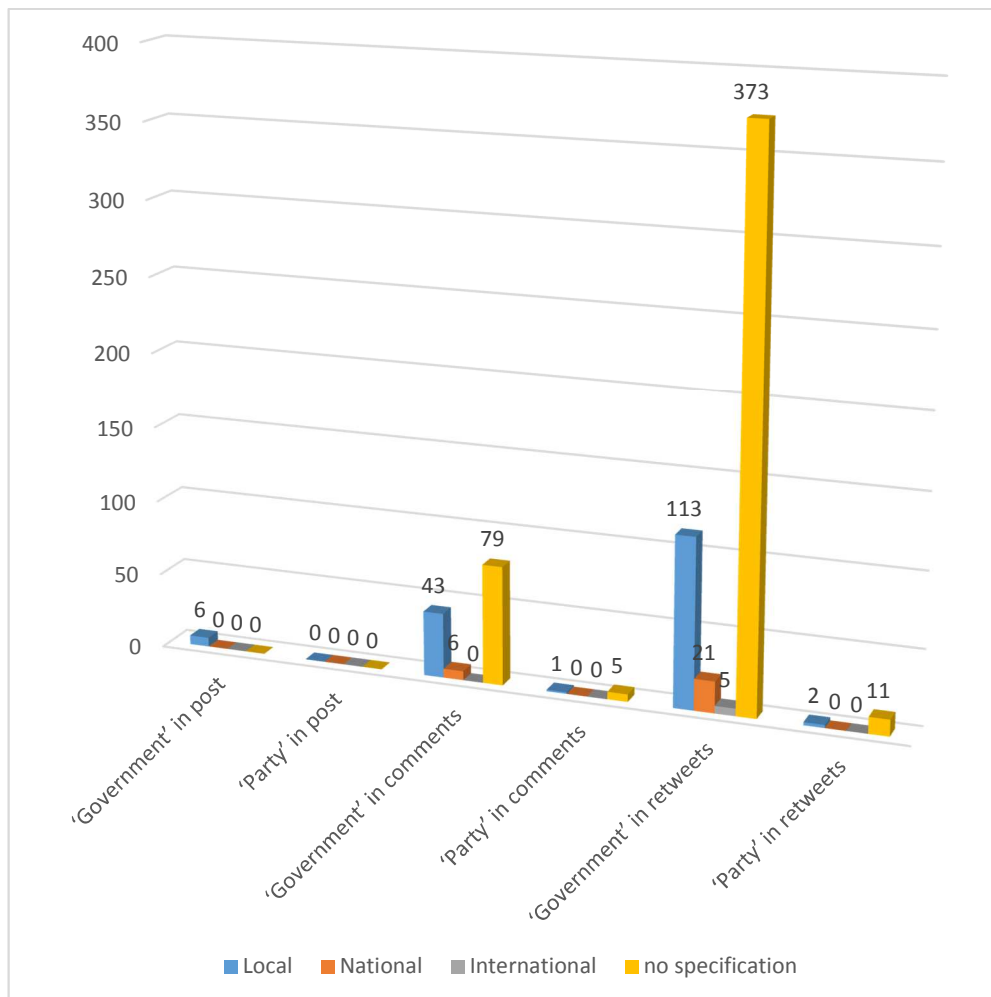


Chart 5.2 Associations of ‘Government’ and ‘Party’ in CCRN Microblog Posts, Comments and Retweets (Level of Government) about the Kunming Oil Refinery



These charts show that in the Kunming oil-refinery debate, the term government was mentioned 954 times, and the term party, 42 time; altogether, the Chinese public authority, both the government and the ruling party, were referred to 996 times. The government/party was mentioned with no specific reference to level (i.e. local, nor national, and international) 673 times. The frequent appearance of the codes, in a general sense, shows that when net-users debated about the plant, the roles of the government have been something they have picked up and talked about. Such a reference is positive.

Within what is generally a positive sign, this research identified a ‘local’ versus ‘national’ divide in that where specific reference was made to the level of government, the local government was referred to far more than the national government. The local government/party was mentioned 279 times, while national government/party was only mentioned 38 times. In other words, the actions, role and behaviours of the local government were talked about more than the national government’s. This finding concurs with Yang (2009) and Ho (2001)’s studies showing that debates around environmental issues are with localised characteristics. In the Kunming case, net-users discussed the plant as an issue pertaining to the local government more than to the national government. On the other hand, this division also highlights the limits to the problematization, which is not to suggest that all levels of public authorities should be equally referred to in any political communication nor is this remark intended to invalidate the net-users’ problematization of this unquestioned area. Regardless of the level of government being referred to, this still constitutes a problematization of the Chinese authorities. But in the Kunming case, even though both local and national government were involved as decision-makers, it was the national government’s decision that held sway. It was the national government’s decision to establish a resource strategy, and it is according to that strategy that the local government was able to build the oil-refinery factory in Kunming. Without the national government’s decision, local government would not have been able to make further decisions. Thus, if individuals were able to critically re-define the meaning of the plant, the national authority’s involvement and decision would in theory weigh far more than the local government’s. And yet, the national government was mentioned far less, failing to reflect its actual involvement in this case. This demonstrates that even when both national and local governments are involved in decision making, it is local government that is far more likely to be mentioned.

After coding the levels of government, the associated roles of the government in the debate were analysed, as illustrated in Charts 5.3 and 5.4:

Chart 5.3 The Roles and Issues Associated with the Government in the 21st CER's Post, Comments and Retweets about the Kunming Refinery

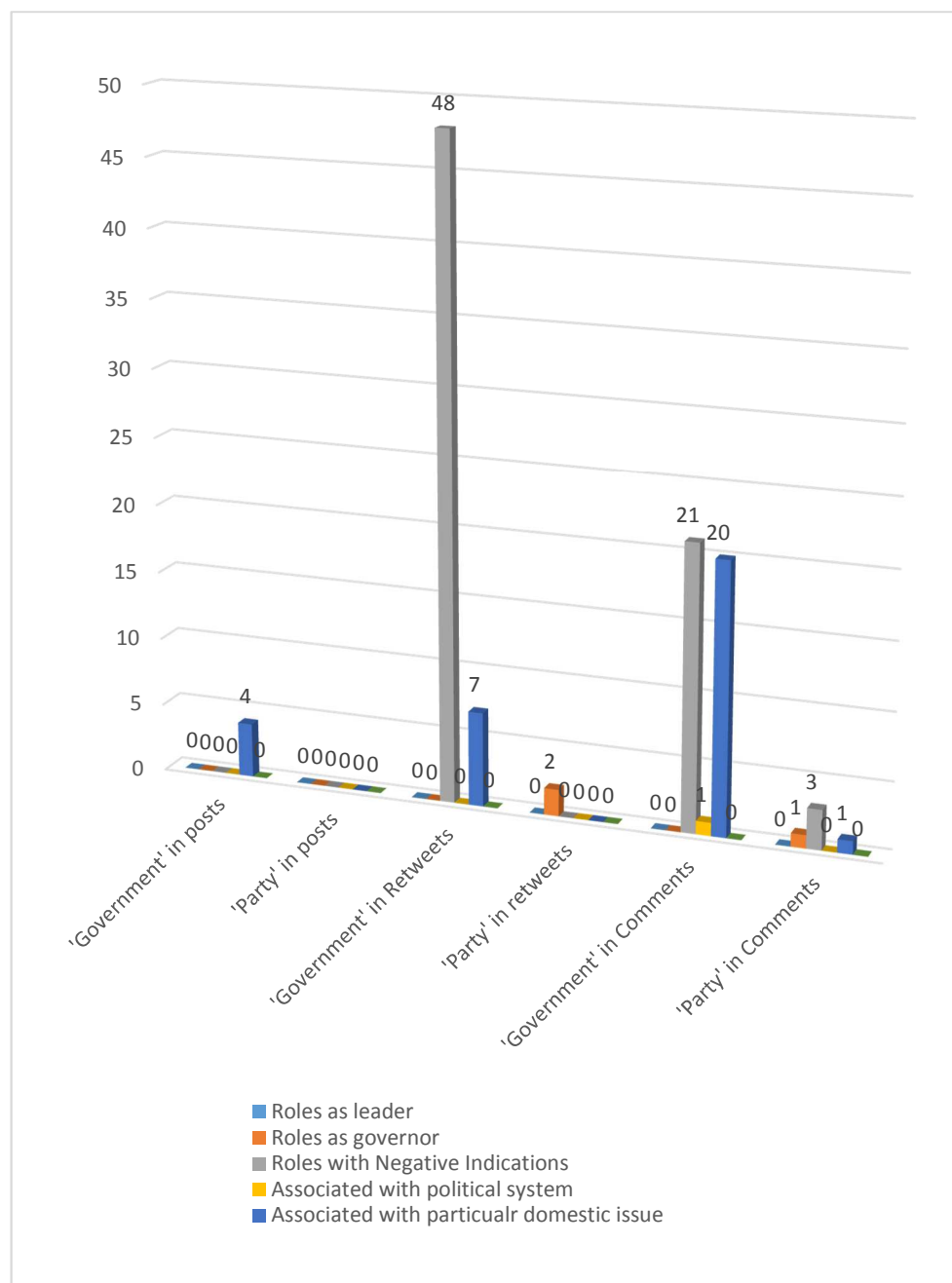
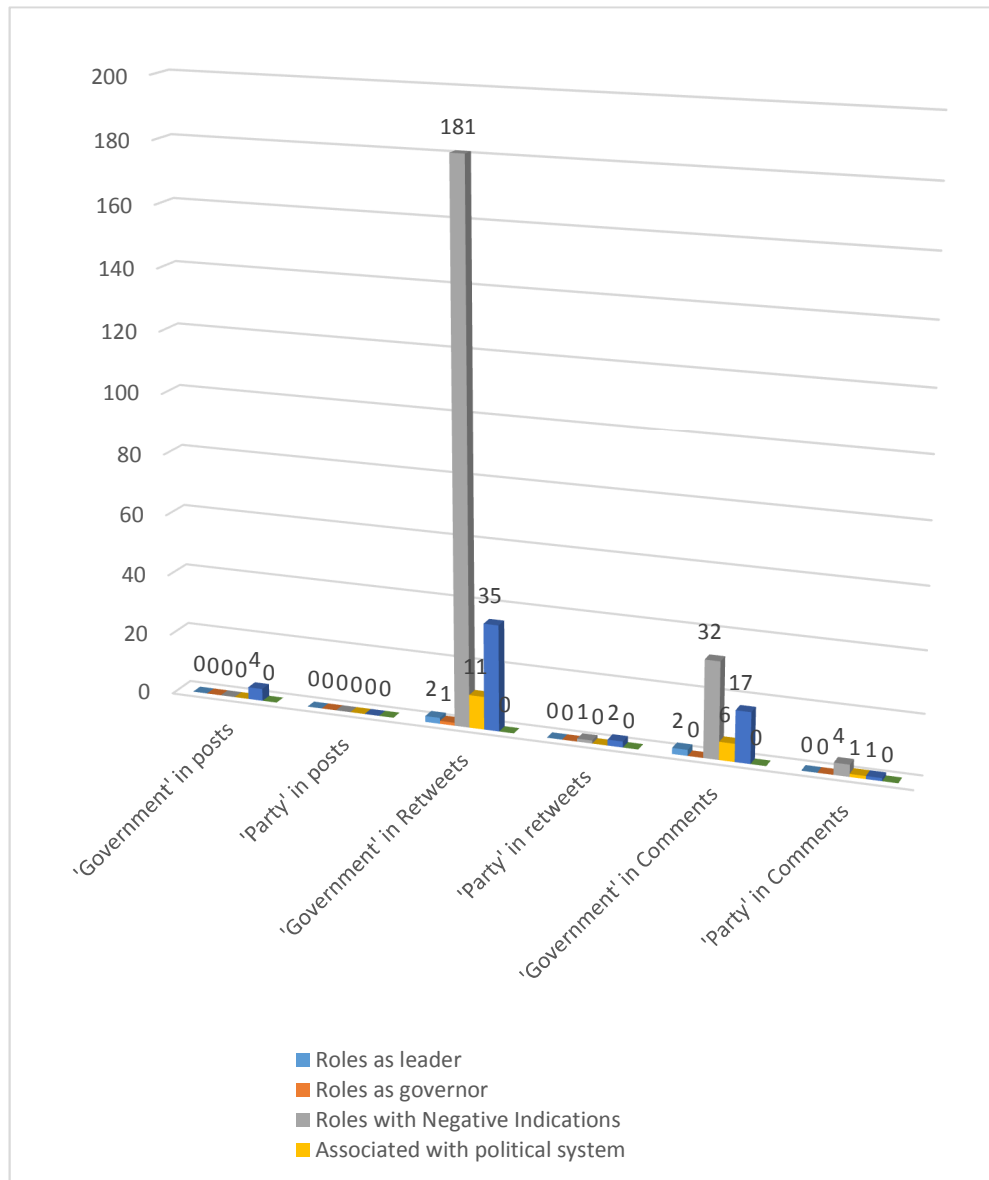


Chart 5.4 The Roles and Issues Associated with the Government in the CCRN's Post, Comments and Retweets about the Kunming Refinery



In empirical studies, this research found not all the texts identified fit with the pre-established categories, because not every exchange was specifically associated with the government as leader, governor, or with negative attributes; nor did they talk about the government in relation to particular issues or system either. Thus, from the total of 996 times the codes government and party appeared, 408 of them were categorised.

In these texts that can be categorised, the role of the governments was more likely to be associated with negative attributes such as being corrupt, weak, stupid and disrespectful of people; this was the case for 290 out of the 408 samples. The most frequently occurring example within this category is the government being accused of destroying ‘the rights to live of the people in another city again (政府又摧毁另一城市人民生存权)’, appearing 25 times. In this example, the action of the government has been suggested as ‘destroying’ people’s right to live, implying in other words that rather than serving the people’s interests and needs, the government is trying to take such rights away from its people. The other example in this category is the call to ‘throw out those government officers who destroy the environment (把破坏环境的政府官员赶下去)’, repeated 10 times, as the second most frequently appearing text in this category. In this example, the role of the government has been negatively portrayed as harmful for the environment. In reaction to the government’s perceived harmful behaviours, individuals were told to ‘throw’ those officers out.

What these numbers demonstrate is that in the discussion about the Kunming oil refinery, when individuals talked about the government, they were more likely to portray them negatively, questioning and criticising their behaviour, rather than seeing them as leaders or the governors. The most frequently occurring texts in particular show that the government’s definition of the plant, in terms of its economic benefits and as part of their resource strategy, were rejected by some net-users, who paid specific attention to the environmental issues raised by the plant, and criticised the government by suggesting their decisions were problematic and did not serve the public interest. Those opinions were openly expressed on Sina Microblog, to inform other individuals and the government of their concerns.

As Charts 5.3 and 5.4 also show, the second most frequent association is the category of ‘particular domestic issues’, which was mentioned 91 times. This

number reflects the nature of this debate, namely a political communication around a particular industrial plant that involves a government decision. By associating the government with this particular plant, individuals could make their discussion specific. What is also significant is that within the discussion about the refinery, individuals attempted to bring in the broader political system in China, referred to 19 times. A key and most frequent example in this category is the phrase ‘the typical case in no-public-elected government (非民选政府的典型案例)’, which appeared 5 times. Although relatively low, this number can be seen as an indication that a handful of individuals not only sought to self-determine the meaning of a particular government decision but also to self-determine the meaning of the political system that allowed the decision to be passed. In this text, net-users argue that the conflict between the public and the government over the Kunming oil-refinery plant was a result of the government not being democratically and therefore making decisions outside of any democratic process. Any decision taken within this system will only address the government’s understanding and needs, not the public’s.

These exchanges demonstrate that while individuals do not challenge the political system in China in major ways, this does not mean that challenge is entirely absent in the online political communications. Certain individuals push the boundaries, problematize the political system, and express their specific concerns about the system itself. However, examples of this kind of problematization are relatively few when compared with the problematization of a particular issue. This suggests that even though individuals can problematize the political system in China, this kind of expression remains the exception. Individuals are still restricted so that when a particular government decision is discussed, it is more likely that the single decision is challenged rather than the system itself. Without problematizing the system, even though one decision may be critically discussed and may lead to a

government response, when similar issues occur in the future, similar decisions will be made because the political system itself remains unquestioned.

References to government and the party in the debates over the Kunming oil refinery show that the online public sphere in China is institutionalised upon *problematization of unquestioned areas* criterion. In the online political communications around this environmental event, Chinese net-users challenged the local government through questioning their decisions. The meaning of the plant can be self-determined, as well as the political system; so in this instance the role of the government in the decision-making process is not only problematized for this occasion, but is also challenged more generally. The online public sphere in China has facilitated a debate which included these critical views, a debate which also illustrates the structure of the *expressional political function*, as individuals' concerns over the plant and over the system were voiced in the public domain, and the government called upon to respond to those needs.

At the same time, the limitations of this problematization and expressions which are challenging or critical, need to be acknowledged as well. Although Chinese net-users are clearly using the online public sphere to criticise the Chinese government, there are areas that remain unquestioned and this is far more likely to be criticism directed at the national government rather than the local government, and questioning of the political system in China itself.

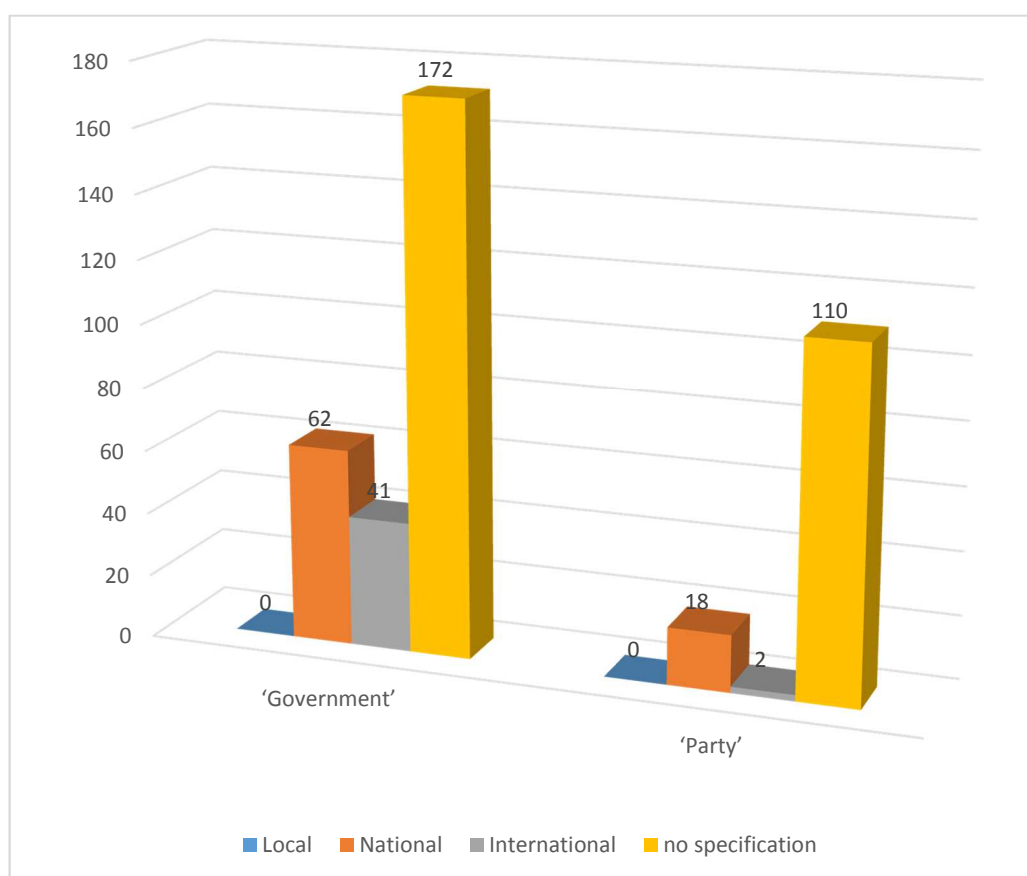
5.1.2 Problematizing Government Decisions and Expressing Concern in the Political Communication of Events Involving Nationalist Views

Debates that involve nationalistic views are also an important part of online political communications in China, and the debate around the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands is the case chosen as an example of this type of

debate. The contentions involved in the debate are multiple, as it is not only the foreign government that has been the target of criticism but also the domestic government; concerns have been expressed towards both the Japanese government's decision and the Chinese government's behaviours.

Chart 5.5 shows in what ways the governments are referred to in the debate.

Chart 5.5 Associations of 'Government' and 'Party' in Tianya BBS's Post (Level of Government) about the Diaoyu/Senkaku Dispute



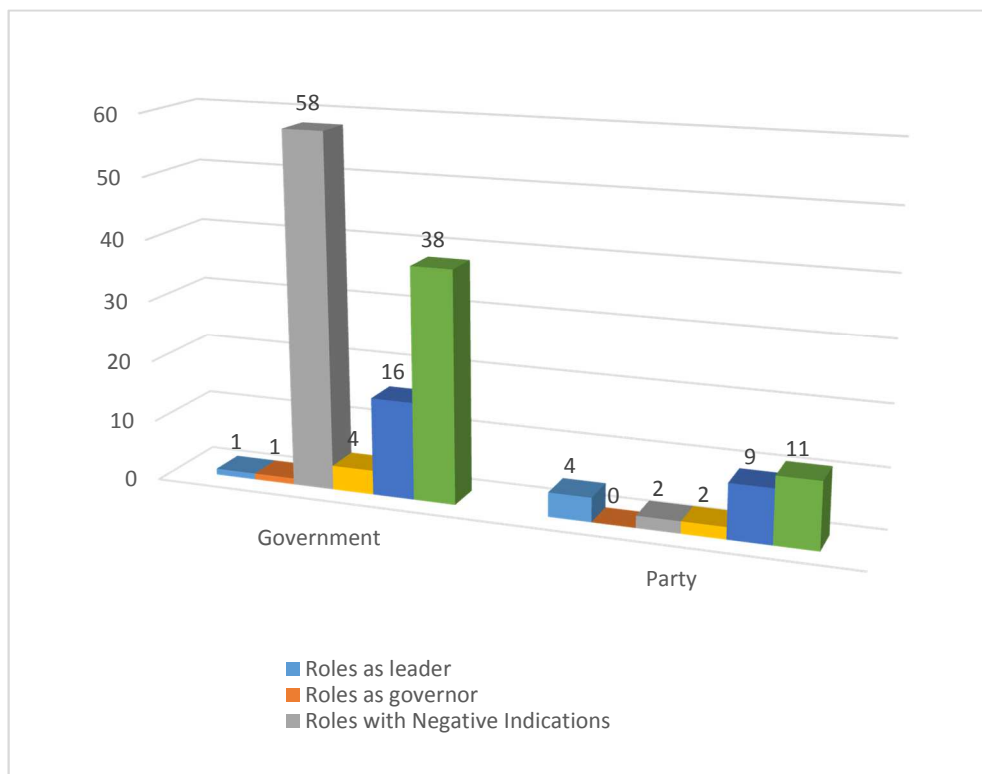
This chart shows that in discussions about the 'purchase plan' event of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, Chinese net-users used the term 'government' 275 times and the term 'party' 130 times, making a total of 405 times. The foreign government, mostly the Japanese government, was specifically mentioned 43 times, while the Chinese domestic authorities were mentioned 80 times,

nearly twice as many as mentions of the foreign government. These numbers suggest that Chinese net-users recognise the role of governments at both domestic and international level as crucial players in this purchase plan event. At the international level, it was the Japanese government's decision to claim sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands by purchasing them from their private owner. This decision was launched to serve the national interests and political needs of the Japanese government. At the domestic level, the Chinese government's diplomatic actions determined how China reacted and dealt with this land dispute. In this dispute, the domestic government is mentioned more often than the foreign government, showing that in this case, net-users were more focussed on the domestic government's behaviours in dealing with the issue.

This concurs with Liu (2006) and Cong (2009)'s observations that online nationalism in China not only involves individuals problematizing international actors, but also involves problematizing their own government. The online space in China is able to facilitate such expressions and problematization towards both levels of government.

Chart 5.6 shows the roles and issues associated with the code 'government' and 'the party' in discussions on Tianya BBS.

Chart 5.6 The Roles and Issues Associated with the Government in Tianya BBS's Post about the Diaoyu/Senkaku Dispute



The chart shows that references to the government/party on Tianya BBS were mainly negative (60 times). This demonstrates in a general sense that when mentioned, the government is more likely to be negatively portrayed, questioned and challenged, rather than being praised for its role as leader or governor. Of the 60 times that the government/party was associated negatively, 13 were towards an international government or party, while the other 47 referred to the domestic government.

When negative comments are made about a foreign government, it is Japan, as the key player in this event, that is targeted. One example in this category is the comment that the ‘Japanese government tries in vain to refuse the result of the WWII through invasion and militarisation’ (日本政府妄图通过侵略和武备否定二战结果). In this text, the Japanese government’s decision to purchase the island is associated with invasion and militarisation, which

means its behaviours have been defined as invading China through violent means, and this invasive and militarised behaviour concerns Chinese net-users. This problematization reflects the central contention in this debate, in which the Japanese government has claimed ownership over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, which China disputes.

The other 47 negative references are directed at the Chinese government. Net-users criticised the Chinese government's actions in dealing with the dispute. One example, the first to appear in this category, is 'You previously said you did not attack the government by any means, but then implied that Chinese government became tough in the Diaoyu Islands, in order to transfer the public criticism on corruption in the government (你前面说没有对政府有任何的攻击，后面就暗示中国政府在钓鱼岛问题上强硬是为了转移公众对政府腐败的指责). In this text, the Chinese government is accused of being corrupt and attempting to use the Diaoyu/Senkaku issue to distract the public from domestic corruption. By constructing the government not as the legitimate protector of national interests, but as exploiting nationalist sentiment as a means of protecting the government from being blamed, this statement challenges the Chinese government's agenda.

In both types of associations, it is possible to observe the problematization of unquestioned areas, in the way that the behaviours of both foreign and domestic governments are questioned by net-users. The meanings of those behaviours are defined by the public to reflect their opinions about and interest in the purchase plan event. Through expressing those opinions and interests, their concerns about Japan and the Chinese government are put into the public domain. The problematization about both levels of government shows the structure of the *problematization of unquestioned areas* and the *expressional political function* in the online public sphere in China.

To sum up, this section shows that online political communications around both domestic and international issues in China are based on Chinese net-users' self-determined opinions. By associating the government at different levels, and by portraying them negatively, individuals self-determine the meaning of government decisions and behaviours. They express their concerns about these decisions as different from the government's definitions, demonstrating their own needs and interests. This section has answered the question *what* was said about the government in the problematization of this specific issue. The following section will focus more specifically on the language used to problematize, thereby answering the question *how* do individuals problematize unquestioned areas and how do they express their concerns. It will specifically focus on how linguistic violence is used to contribute to communication about political issues.

5.2 The Function of Linguistic Violence in the Structure of *Problematization of Unquestioned Areas* and the *Expressional Political Function* of the Online Public sphere

Language usage is a critical element in the structure of *problematization of unquestioned areas* institutional criterion and the *expressional political function* in the public sphere. In contrast to Habermas's emphasis on rationality in language, this research is based on the argument that it is necessary to include other types of language usage. With regards to online political communication in China, this research argues that linguistic violence is a significant part of the debate but has not been given enough attention. Thus, the research uses linguistic violence as an angle from which to study the structure of the online public sphere in China.

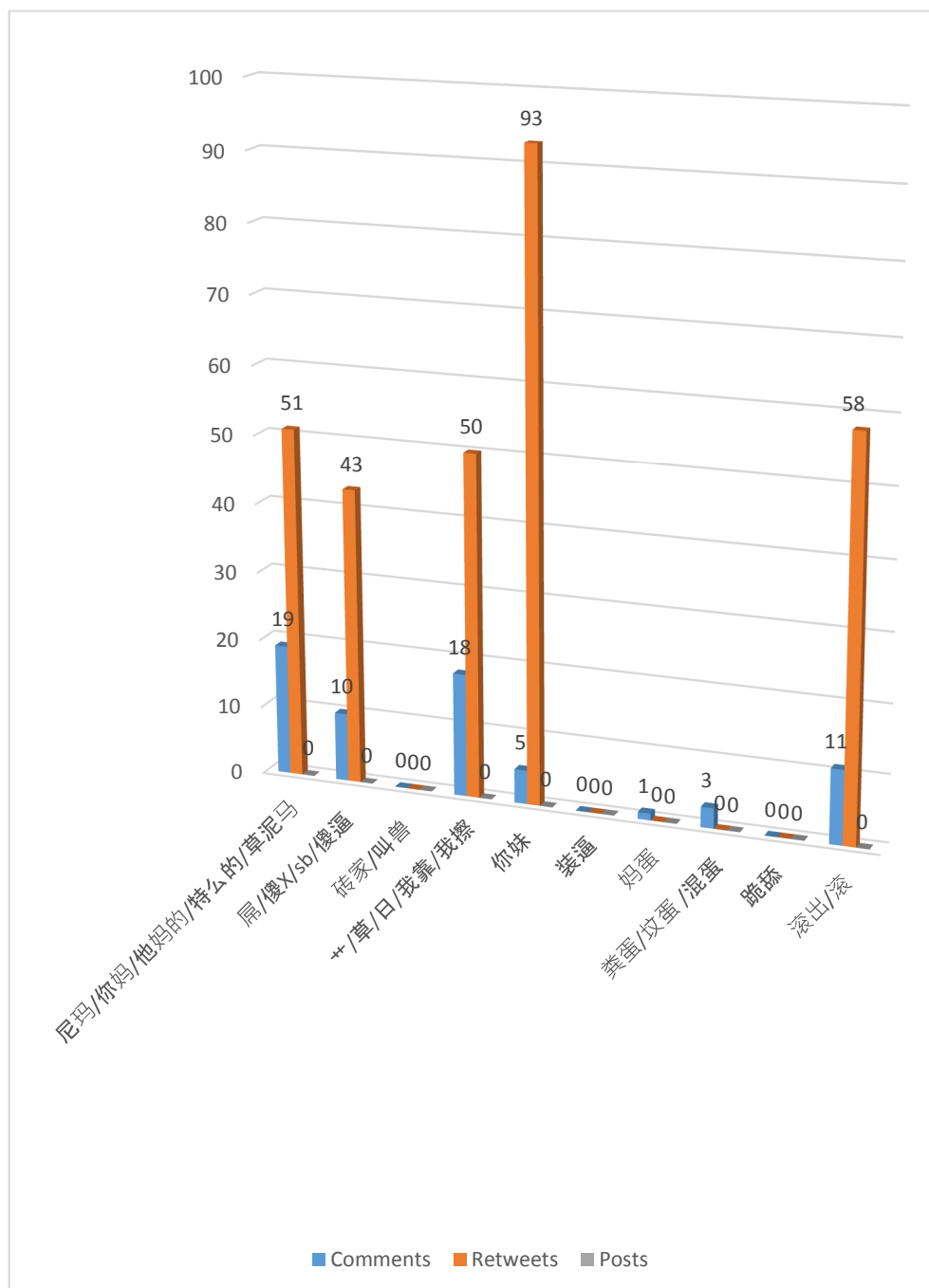
To understand how linguistic violence is used and how it might contribute, this section firstly presents and discusses the quantitative data collected

through content analysis, to demonstrate the frequency of abusive terms used in the political debates, and their associations. This helps to show how often net-users use linguistic violence, and what it is used for. Through applying SFL and CDA it will then give specific examples of language use.

5.2.1 Abusive Terms and Their Targets of Attacks

To draw a picture of the occurrence of linguistic violence in the online political communications, exchanges were coded using the Ranking of Low-Taste Words on the Internet 2014 (2014 年网络低俗词语排行), published by the Chinese central party media, the People's Daily as the main examples of linguistic violence in China's online political communications. These terms are said to be swearing and abusive terms used by net-users to violently attack, offend and humiliate others through linguistic means. By using this list, this research was able to identify online linguistic violence in its most visible form: swearing. 21st CER and CCRN's blog posts and Tianya BBS's debate were analysed. The following charts present the findings.

Chart 5.7 Abusive Terms and Swearing in 21st CER's Posts, Comments and Retweets about the Kunming Oil Refinery¹⁷



¹⁷ Translation of the codes: 尼玛/你妈的 your mother' s/他妈的/特么的/tmd his mother' /草泥马 Grass Mud Horse (fuck your mother); 屌 dick /傻 X/sb/傻逼 stupid dick; 砖家/叫兽 (a person who pretends to be professor or specialists ; ++/日 fuck/我靠/我擦 I fuck; 你妹 your sister' s ; 装逼 pretend to be a pussy; 妈蛋 mother' s ball; 混蛋/粪蛋/坟蛋 bustar; 跪舔 bending down and licking; 滚出/滚 fuck off

Chart 5.8 Targets of Swearing and Abusing in 21st CER's Comments and Retweets about the Kunming Oil Refinery

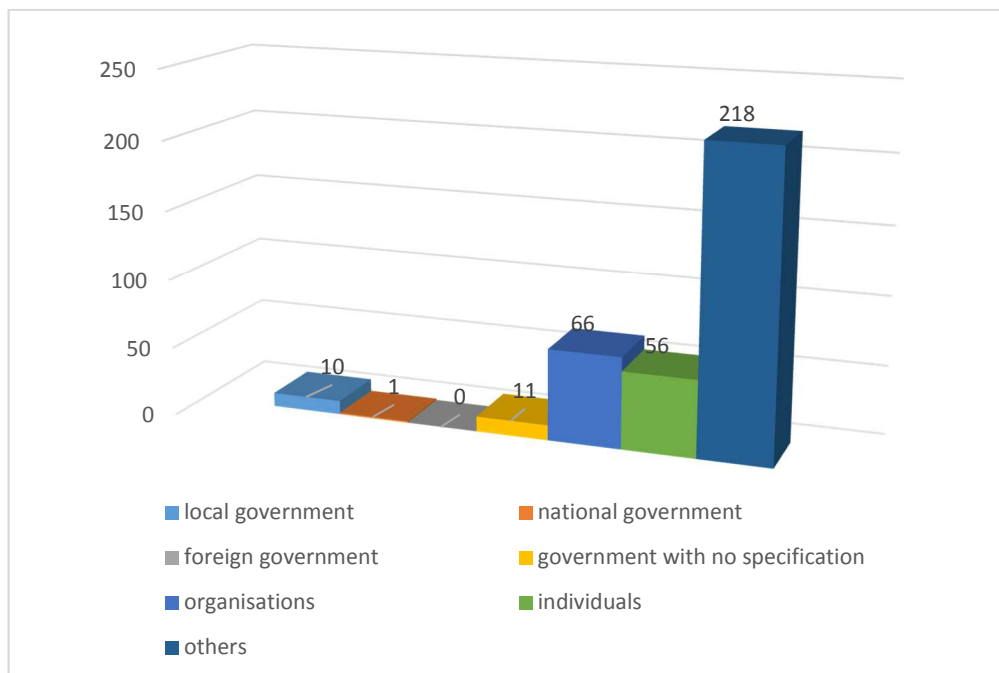
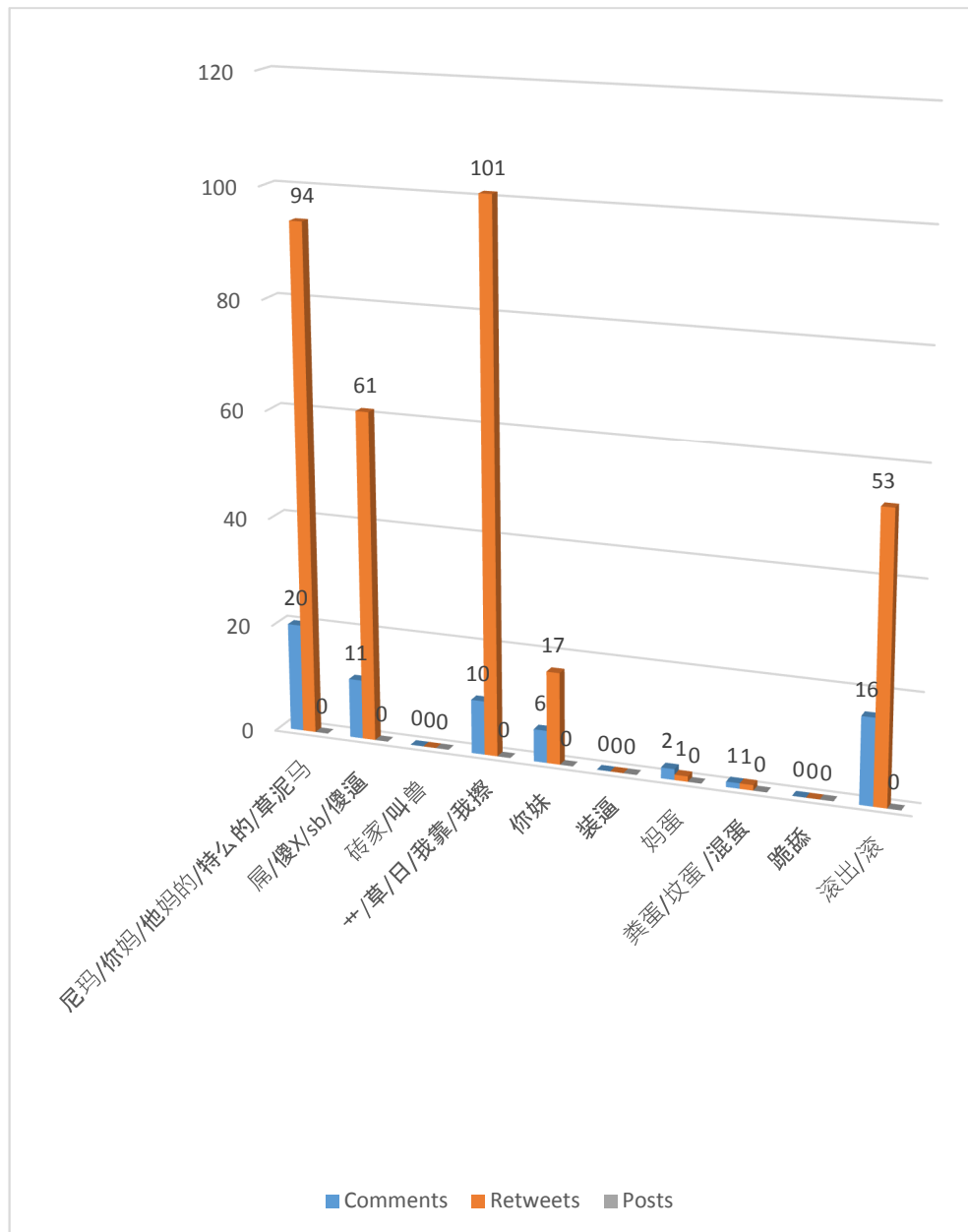
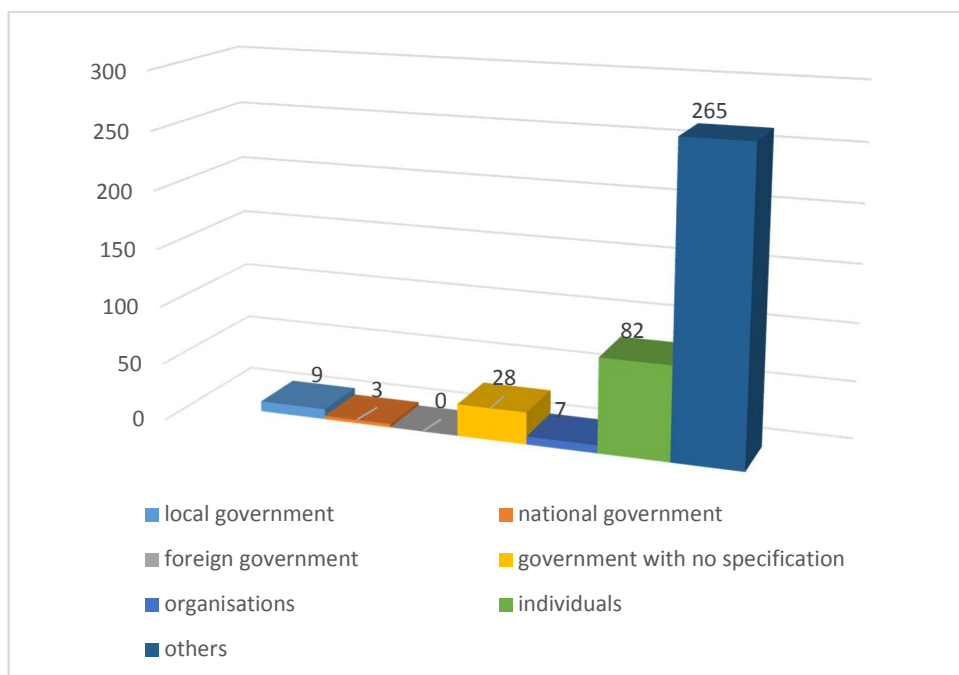


Chart 5.9 Abusive Terms and Swearing in CCRN's Posts, Comments and Retweets about the Kunming Oil Refinery¹⁸



¹⁸ Translation of the codes: 尼玛/你妈的 your mother' s/他妈的/特么的/tmd his mother' /草泥马 Grass Mud Horse (fuck your mother); 屌 dick /傻 X/sb/傻逼 stupid dick; 砖家/叫兽 (a person who pretends to be professor or specialists ; 艹/日 fuck/我靠/我擦 I fuck; 你妹 your sister' s ; 装逼 pretend to be a pussy; 妈蛋 mother' s ball; 混蛋/粪蛋/坟蛋 bustard; 跪舔 bending down and licking; 滚出/滚 fuck off

Chart 5.10 Targets of Swearing and Abusing in CCRN's Comments and Retweets about the Kunming Oil Refinery



From Chart 5.7 and Chart 5.9, it can be seen that in discussions about the Kunming oil refinery on Sina Microblog, abusive and swear words were used 756 times, 5.6 % of the total amount of posts, comments and retweets in the two blog posts. In other words, out of every 100 texts, 5.6 of them contain swear words. It should be noted that the 10 terms used here are only a small part of the total lexicon of swear words in Chinese languages and net-users did use other swear words in the expressions, but they are too diverse to categorise them all. Applying this limited group of codes provides a snapshot of linguistic violence in the form of swear and abusive words being used as a form of attack in political communications about the Kunming oil-refinery.

To understand the structure of the *problematization of unquestioned areas* and *expressional political function* of the online public sphere in China, what is more important is what linguistic violence is being used for and what/who are the targets, since this indicates the areas in which there was disagreement, and

in which attacks and challenges were conveyed through linguistic means. By identifying them, it is possible to find out whether linguistic violence is being used as a tool for individuals to problematize the government or their behaviours, and to express their concerns.

As explained in the methodology chapter, to achieve the above purpose, six categories were created to code the associations with the swear words, by asking whether it was the government, the organisations or individuals who were attacked by swear words. Analysis of the data from the two microblog posts found that swear words were not necessarily used towards any of the six pre-established targets. Chart 5.8 and Chart 5.10 demonstrate that ‘others’ is the largest category. This is when swear words were not used towards the government, individuals or any organisation, but rather they could be used in referring to a specific event, or even were not specifically associated with anything. The most frequent text in the ‘others’ category was ‘PX/oil-refinery fuck off (石化/PX 滚出/滚粗)’, which appeared 57 times. In this instance, the swear word ‘fuck off’ was not used against any government, organisation or individual, but rather towards the specific PX production and oil-refinery. Through using the term ‘fuck off’, net-users show their dislike of and disapproval about the plant, and their desire for the plant to be removed. Although those who used the term to refer to PX and the oil-refinery do not provide rational explanations for this association, their attitude towards the plant, and their wish to see the plant suspended, are made clear. The problematization of and concerns about the Kunming plant are clear, namely, the public disagreed with the government’s decision to construct a plant in Kunming.

The second largest category after ‘other’ was ‘individuals’: particular individuals were attacked 138 times in the debate. Those individuals included the particular government officers involved in the decision making, and particular net-users who had given voice to different opinions. The most

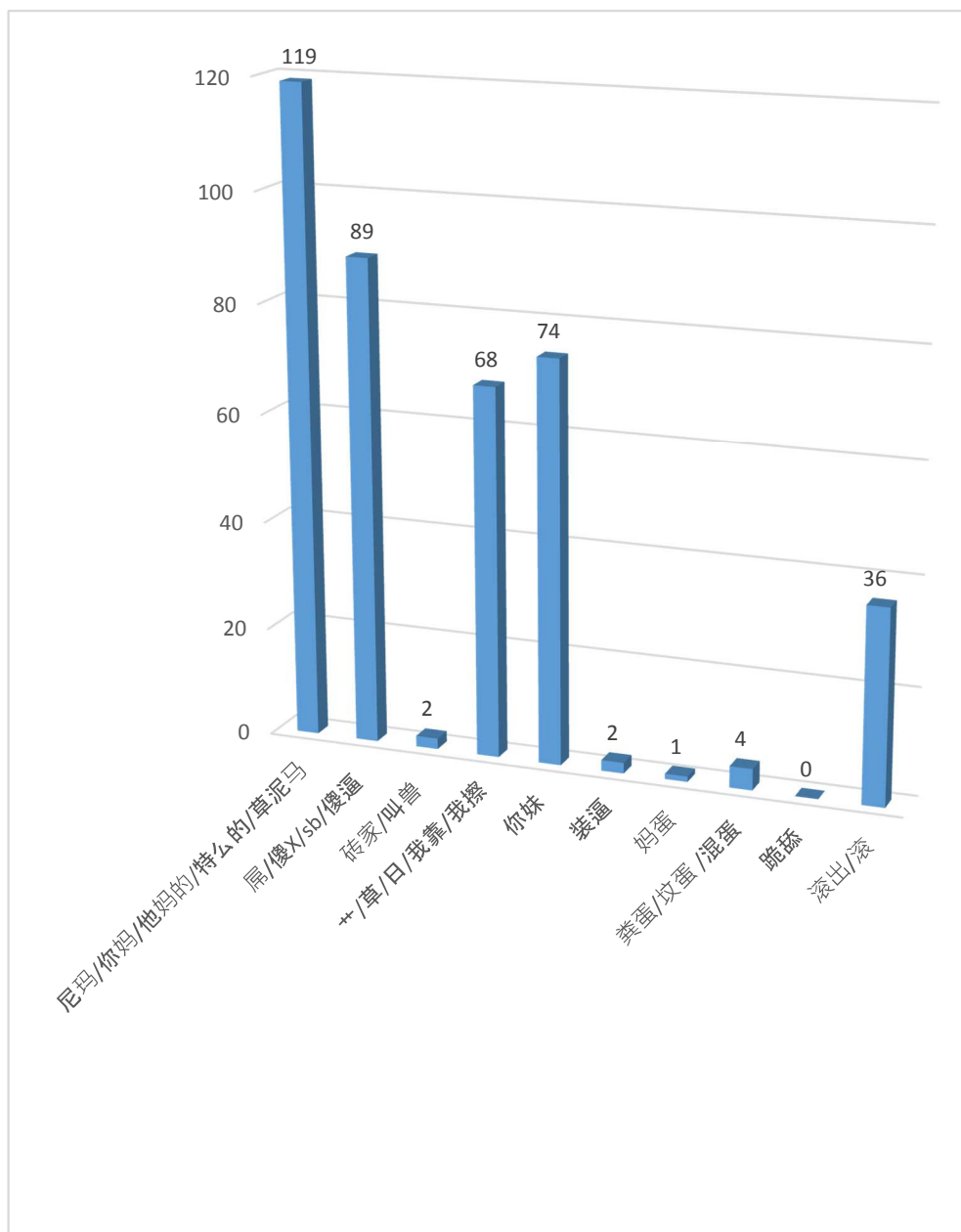
frequent phrase in which a swear word appeared (17 times) was ‘government officers (or the specific name or position of the officer) are stupid dicks (sb/ 傻逼官员)’. In this association, net-users use the humiliating term ‘stupid dicks’ to label those government officers who were involved in the decision to build the oil-refinery in Kunming, as a way of problematizing their behaviour. By calling those officers ‘stupid dicks’, individuals not only humiliated them, but also imply that the decision was made by stupid dicks, and by association, is also stupid. Once again, by using a swear word to refer to particular individuals, net-users demonstrate their anger, challenging and problematizing the oil-refinery.

This research also found that swear words were used directly to refer to the government itself 62 times. The most frequently used phrase (8 times) was ‘sb/傻逼政府 (government are stupid dicks)’. Here, the individual decision-makers are substituted by the government so that rather than blaming the individual decision-makers of the plant, net-users problematize the government as a whole. By calling the government ‘stupid dicks’, anger towards the government and its decision were able to be expressed in the public domain.

This research argues that the use of swear words, as a form of linguistic violence contributes to the structure of the *problematization of the unquestioned areas* criterion and the *expressional political function* in China’s online public sphere. By using swear words, net-users are attacking the government, the officers and their decisions. In this process of violently attacking, swear words are used as parts of a self-determined language in which individuals are able to give voice to their understanding of government’s role and decisions, and especially to show their dislike and disapproval. The use of those swear words, although not necessarily used as part of a reasoned argument, successfully convey the strength of public opinion and public concerns.

When it comes to debates around international issues, the use of swear words and associations also contribute to the structure of *problematization of the unquestioned areas* criterion and the *expressional political function*. The following two charts explain and discuss the findings.

Chart 5.11 Abusive Terms and Swearing in Tianya Posts about the Diaoyu/Senkaku Dispute¹⁹



¹⁹ Translation of the codes: 尼玛/你妈的 your mother' s/他妈的/特么的/tmd his mother' /草泥马 Grass Mud Horse (fuck your mother); 屌 dick /傻 X/sb/傻逼 stupid dick; 砖家/叫兽 (a person who pretends to be professor or specialists; 艹/日 fuck/我靠/我擦 I fuck; 你妹 your sister' s; 装逼 pretend to be a pussy; 妈蛋 mother' s ball; 混蛋/粪蛋/坟蛋 bustar; 跪舔 bending down and licking; 滚出/滚 fuck off

Chart 5.12 Targets of Targets of Swearing and Abusing in Tianya's Posts about the Diaoyu/Senkaku Dispute

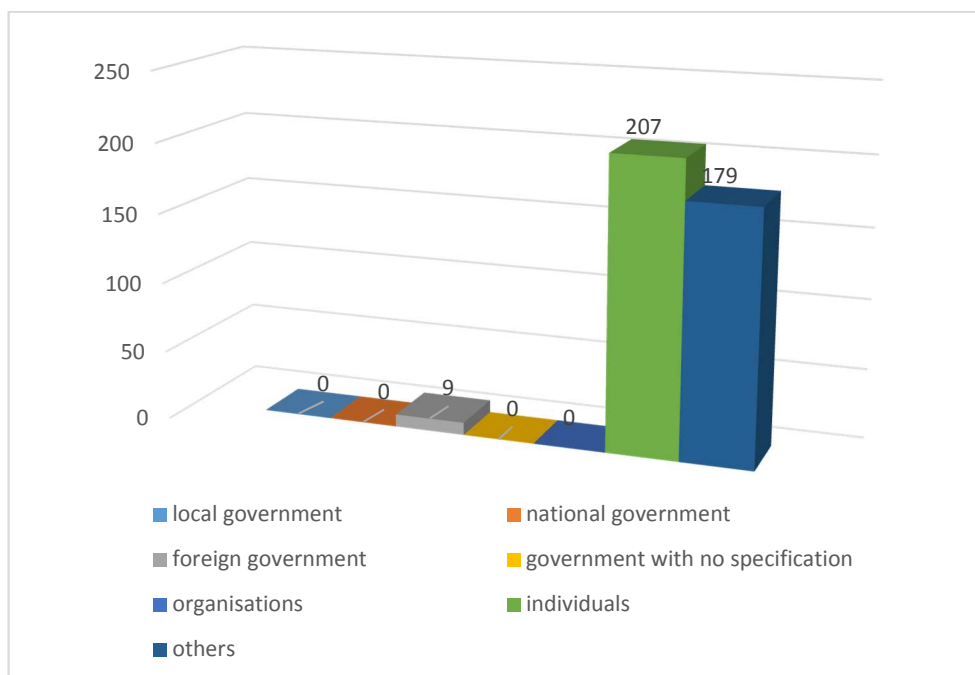


Chart 5.11 and Chart 5.12 show in the exchanges around the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute between Japan and China, swear words were used 395 times, 20.9% of the total posts in this debate. The percentage is far higher than swear words used in debating the Kunming oil refinery. This finding confirms Kádár et al's (2013) observation that contentious debates with nationalistic appeal are more likely to give rise to violent attacks by linguistic means, as a way of expressing anger and nationalist sentiments.

In this debate this kind of language targeted particular individuals 207 times, mainly, the person who created the thread, referred to 52 times as a 'stupid dick' (傻逼). This person was attacked for expressing the view that Japan should be regarded as 'innocent' (无辜) in the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute. Through analysing the use of this swear word, both the frequency and its collocation in the utterance, it is possible to understand that while there are

individuals who defended Japan, more individuals disagreed with this position and used linguistic violence to convey this.

In 179 of the instances in which a swear word was used, it was not in reference to any obvious target, so that it was not possible to ascertain exactly what individuals wanted to attack, but simply, it conveyed the strong emotions that this dispute provoked. Swear words used to attack foreign governments 9 times, 8 of which were directed at Japan. None of the 10 most common swear words were used to attack the domestic government. This shows that in this nationalistic debate, swear words were more likely to be used to attack foreign governments, than being used to humiliate the domestic government.

When compared to the debate about Kunming oil-refining plan, there was far more linguistic violence around the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands debate; but at the same time, was less likely to be used to challenge and problematize the Chinese government. They are more likely to be used to convey individual opinions about the issue to express nationalistic anger towards a foreign government, and towards any individual who attempted to defend it. What this means for the structure of the *problematization of unquestioned areas* and the *expressional political function* of the online public sphere in China, is that through linguistic violence, opinions around an international affair were expressed and exchanged; individuals were able to use those humiliating terms to challenge opinions they disagreed with, and attack particular people or countries they disliked. Even if these words are not necessarily used to challenge the Chinese government, they are still indications of public opinion and become part of the public discourse around this issue. This has helped to realise the very fundamental function of the public sphere: enabling people to express their opinions that reflect their interests and needs, in this case, their nationalistic interests, and their need to stand up to Japan and claim ownership of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. But the contribution linguistic violence makes does not go beyond this fundamental function because the main target

was one individual who defended Japan in the debate, and it was this individual who was repeatedly humiliated and attacked for holding a view that was contrary to the popular nationalistic position in which Japan is portrayed as an enemy. Such attacks, although demonstrating public anger towards Japan and individuals defending its action, were mainly personal rather than being part of critically problematizing the national or foreign governments' role in dealing with this dispute.

5.2.2 Discourse Analysis of the Functions of Linguistic Violence in Political Communication

The above section outlined the frequency of swearing and the targets of linguistic violence. This section will look at other forms of linguistic violence other than the direct use of swear words directed at individuals or governments to express strong disapproval; linguistic violence can also take the form of ironic metaphors through which targets are ridiculed. Such usage is a safe, but still powerful and self-determined way to express challenging opinions in the online public sphere, contributing to problematization of public authorities. To illustrate this usage, two examples have been selected for analysis through SFL and CDA lenses, to show how linguistic violence has been used by individuals to question the unquestioned, and to express their concerns and needs.

5.2.2.1 鸡的屁 (Jidipi) and Problematization of Government's GDP-Driven Decision

As discussed in Chapter 2, scholars like Meng (2011), Sullivan (2012) and Wallis (2015) have argued that one crucial way in which Chinese net-users problematize the government's decision is through using ironic metaphors with double meaning. The example they all illustrated is the phrase 'Grass

Mud Horse (草泥马)'. This word in writing refers to a kind of animal, but in pronunciation, it reads as 'cao ni ma', which is the same as the pronunciation '操你妈 (fuck your mother)'. Grass Mud Horse became widely used by Chinese net-users as a response to the Chinese government's policy announcement that 'low-taste' and 'vulgar' words online would be censored, in order to create a 'clean' online environment. Because the word 操你妈 is obviously 'vulgar' and 'low-taste', and was likely to be removed under such a policy, individuals introduced the word 草泥马, as a replacement. By using this word, Chinese net-users are communicating a vulgar meaning but in a non-vulgar way, enabling them to ridicule the government's decision to censor, and at the same time express their self-determined opinions about the policy.

This research found there are other terms falling into the same category as the 'Grass Mud Horse' in China's online political debates. One example is 鸡的屁 (Jidipi), which was repeatedly used in discussions about the Kunming oil-refinery. The term 鸡的屁, in writing refers to the fart of a chicken, and in pronunciation it reads as *ji di pi*. This pronunciation is the same as GDP (Gross domestic product), the 'main measure' of 'economic growth based on the value of goods and services produced during a given period' for a country²⁰. Therefore, when this term is used, it might refer to the fart of the animal, but could refer to the growth of GDP. When the word refers to the GDP, the pronunciation 鸡的屁 is brought, but the meaning of it has been re-defined to ridicule the public authority's GDP-driven policies and decisions.

The context for the creation of the word is that for a long time, economic growth in China has been placed in much higher in the government's domestic development policies. Increasing GDP, as the crucial measurement

²⁰ This explanation is provided by the office of the National Statistics of the UK. Access through: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossdomesticproductgdp>, Access on 18/09/2016

of economic growth, has become the aim of the authorities. But placing GDP at the centre of government policy has been at the expense of the environment, since it leads to the over-consumption of natural resources and pollution. This struggle between GDP-driven policy and environmental concerns is also the cause of the central contention in political communications around the Kunming oil-refinery. In this context, when individuals use the word 鸡的屁 to refer to the GDP, their purpose is not to avoid censorship, because GDP is not normally seen as a sensitive term, but rather, to criticise the Chinese government's GDP-centric approach. Associating GDP with the fart of the animal undermines and ridicules the notion of GDP, intimating that it is as meaningless as a fart. In this way, a concept that the government has defined as crucial to its policy (the GDP), has been problematized and re-defined through a humiliating label.

The function of the term 鸡的屁, becomes clearer when seen in context. The term was used 49 times in the comments and retweets of 21st CER and CCRN's microblogs. It first appears in a retweet on 2013-4-23 at 11:16, as follows:

Totally against, we do not need 鸡的屁, we need healthy environment, those people who are in powers, (fuck) your mother, you ruined and harmed the next generation of our Yunnan people for your own careers. (坚决反对，我们不需要鸡的屁，我们需要健康的环境，尼玛的当政、为了你们的仕途，祸害我们云南的子孙后代。)

The following table is an SFL break down of the text:

Chart 5. 13 SFL Analysis of the Retweet on Sina Microblog Containing the Term 鸡的屁

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Actors | we, we, those people who, you |
| Processes | totally against, do not need, need, are in, fuck, ruined, harmed |
| Goals | 鸡的屁, healthy environment, power, your mother, the next generation of our Yunnan people, for your own careers |
| Circumstances | N/A |

In this text, there two camps of *actors*, one is ‘we’ and one is ‘those people’ as ‘you’. The actions and relations associated with ‘we’ are ‘do not need 鸡的屁’, but need for the ‘healthy environment’. The actions and relations that are constructed for ‘you’ are ‘in power’ but ‘ruined and harmed’ the Yunnan people, for their ‘own careers’. By establishing those two camps and each being ascribed a position and behaviours, this text clearly shows that ‘we’ and ‘Yunnan people’ are opposite to ‘those who’ are ‘in power’. What ‘we’ need and what ‘those people’ need is totally different. Of the two camps, ‘those people’ are constructed with more power than ‘we’, because ‘our Yunnan people’ is the *goal* of ‘those people’s’ actions of ‘ruin’ and ‘harm’, which suggest ‘we’ are the victims of ‘those people’, while ‘we’ has not been constructed with the power to have ‘those people’ as the *goals*. In other words, ‘those people’ can have power over us, but ‘we’ are not given such powers. Instead, the power ‘we’ have is to rebel against ‘those people’s’ behaviours by expressing what ‘we’ think about their behaviours, particularly by stressing that ‘we’ ‘need a healthy environment’, but ‘do not need 鸡的屁’. In this text, the term 鸡的屁 appears as a *goal* for the *actor* ‘we’ through a *process* of ‘do not need’, which clearly shows that 鸡的屁 does not belong to

the ‘we’ camp. This puts 鸡的屁 on the same side as ‘those people’, because both are what ‘we’ have argued against through this text.

If CDA is brought into the analysis, to associate the discourse within the context of the whole debate, then what this text tries to suggest is that by having the Kunming oil-refinery, the government in power is being driven by GDP, and is ruining and harming the interests and needs of Yunnan people, and its next generation. What Yunnan people need is a healthy environment, not the GDP that is created by industrial development. In this debate, the opinions that are expressed through the use of this term challenge an unquestioned area, since it defines the government’s role as having a negative impact on the public, and clearly opposes the government’s decision regarding the oil refinery. The function of the word 鸡的屁 is not only to express the opinion that the Kunming locals ‘do not need’ the plant, but also adds a sense of disdain towards it. In addition, the use of the linguistically humiliating term raises the level of scepticism towards GDP-driven actions, thereby enhancing individual problematization and the expression of self-determined needs and concerns.

However, it should be noted that although individuals use the term 鸡的屁 to ridicule and attack the government’s GDP-driven policy which lies behind the Kunming plant, it is still the government that is constructed as having the power. In this case, the power is negative, since it harms people, but it remains the case that they have the power to negatively impact on people’s lives. Thus, although individuals problematize the GDP as the fart of a chicken, this text still constructs the Yunnan people as being harmed by the public authority, and as not being able to do much to change this situation other than humiliating the government in language. In other words, the public communicated what they needed and did not need, but did not actually act or suggest any actions to oppose the government’s harmful decision. This shows the limitations of problematization: individuals can attack the government

linguistically, but this does not have much influence on what the government does to the public.

Using of words like 鸡的屁 contributes to the structure of the *problematization of unquestioned areas* and the *expressional political function* of the online public sphere in China because it enhances individuals' questioning of GDP-driven policies and enables them to attack the government's actions. But this contribution is limited in the sense that, although attacks are made through this humiliating label, individuals tended to be constructed with little power to change the government's decision. In other words, individuals can ridicule the GDP, but cannot change the fact that GDP is central to government actions.

5.2.2.2 Linguistically Violent Metaphors and Problematization of Chinese Political System

Previously in this chapter, it was stated that statistically, when individuals speak of the 'government' and the 'party', they merely associate them with the political system in China. However small in number, this does not mean that individuals never problematize the system. This research found problematization of the political system does exist in political debates, either through direct reference to the 'party' and the 'government' or through indirect and ironic metaphors, whose popularity cannot be quantitatively measured but require readers to understand every text within their context. Both are mechanisms that allow Chinese net-users to problematize the political system in China, and express their disappointment and disapproval. As suggested in the literature review the former form of dissent is more easily identified by the monitoring system through the key terms; thus, they can be seen occasionally but do not constitute a major trend. The use of the latter, on the other hand, offers individuals more chance to express challenging opinions towards the political system in China and avoid censorship. By

playing with and twisting language, individuals problematize the political system in China in indirect ways. Those expressions require close reading of the text to understand their contextualised meanings, but they are equally powerful and crucial as expressions of individuals' self-determined opinions in the public domain.

This section illustrates how ironic metaphors have been used in the debate to enable individual problematization of the Chinese political system, and discusses how this contributes to the *problematization of unquestioned areas* and the *expressional political function* of the online public sphere in China.

The following example is from Writer A's microblog, published on 20th December 2012:

“In China, every time when I am about to accuse those people who always use swear words to humiliate others, as reactions to their abuse, I find there are some other people riding on their necks. Those who sit on others' necks are shitting on people under them. So every time the first type of people open their mouth to speak bullshit, they are smelly and dirty. I am wondering, why they never say anything to the people on their necks. Because they only need to look up to find out who is making them so dirty. I can only say: you ought not to be together.”²¹

Without knowing the context, it is still possible to ascertain from this post that A describes himself as in an argument with people who have ‘humiliated’ him and that those people were, in his opinion, ‘dirty and smelly’ because some other people were shitting above them. Based on this basic understanding, the following table deconstruct the text through SFL lens:

²¹Access through: <http://www.weibo.com/1191808911/zaBrg07pJ>, Access on: 20/02/2013. The original in Chinese: 在中国，对于那些张嘴就骂的人，每当我想回骂的时候，都会发现骂人者的脖子上还骑着一些人，他们正往他身上拉屎，而那个骂人者就披屎带尿、臭气熏天地对着你胡扯，我很奇怪，他们为何不骂骑在他们脖子上的人，因只需一抬头，他们便能发现到底是谁令他们如此不堪，我目前只能提醒：你们不是天生一对儿。

Chart 5. 14 SFL Analysis of Writer A's Microblog Post on 20th December 2012

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Actors | I; those people (who always use swear words to humiliate others) <People I>; people (riding on others' necks) <People II>; You; |
| Process | Accuse; found; wondering; say to; Use/humiliate; abuse; open/speak; are; say; need to look up/find out; need/ be together; riding; sit; shitting; is making, can, say, ought not to be together, |
| Goal | Those people; other people; you; others; A; mouth; bullshit; smelly and dirty; people; who; Them (their); others; people; them dirty, |
| Circumstance | In China (<i>where</i>); every time (<i>when</i>); on necks (<i>where</i>); Swear words (<i>how</i>); on their neck (<i>where</i>); Their neck(<i>where</i>); neck(<i>where</i>); under them(<i>where</i>) |

From the above table, it is possible to see that through an SFL lens, there are three actors in this argument: *I* (as *A*), *People I* (as individuals humiliated *A*) and *People II* (as those who sit on someone's neck). Among these three actors, actions are taken, and power relations are established in the discourse. 15 *processes*, namely the actions and power relations, were performed in the discourse among these three. Through this discourse, 'I' as the *actor*, is the most powerful one; this is not only because 'I' has the power to conduct more processes than the other two, but also because I has the power to problematize the actions and power relations between *People I* and *People II*, while those two 'people', were not constructed with such powers. To explain this: at the beginning of the text, 'I' says they want to 'accuse' *People I* as a 'reaction', because *People I* 'humiliated' 'others' through 'swear words'. To make this accusation, 'I' says *People I* 'speak bullshit', thus are 'smelly and dirty'. 'I' also explains the reason why *People I* were so, because *People II* 'ride on their necks' and 'shit', thus polluting *People I*. 'I' also offers a suggestion to *People I*, which is that they do not need to be together with *People II*.

In those processes, 'I' has occupied the position of an outsider watching and describing the relations between *People I* and *People II*, as well as their actions. 'I' portrays the relation between *People I* and *People II* as dirty and unpleasant, but 'I' does not belong to such a dirty relationship, and has the power to comment and criticise them; while neither *People I* nor *People II* can comment on 'I's' behaviour in the discourse. What is more, those two types of people are not constructed with the power to conduct any processes towards 'I' at all. This once again underlines 'I's' powerful position that is constructed through the discourse.

Meanwhile, between *People I* and *People II*, *People II* is more powerful. This is firstly because among the 7 processes constructed between *People I* and *People II*, in 4 of them, *People I* are the goals of *People II*. This means *People II* have more power to do things to *People I*, while *People I* are less powerful, and more likely to act as the receivers of the actions. This is also because of the characteristics of the *processes* and *circumstance* between them: *People II* can 'ride' 'sit', 'shit' and 'make' on *People I*, and can be 'on the neck' of *People I*. By suggesting those actions and relations, an 'above' versus 'under' picture has been drawn, in which *People II* are on top of *People I*, and have the power to 'make' *People I* do things, while *People I* can only 'say' 'need to look up and find out' *People II*. Those processes, although enacted by *People I* towards *People II*, do not actually change *People II's* behaviour, nor the 'ride/sit on the neck' position that *People II* occupies. The 'look up' process underlines the above-under relations between the two.

Through SFL, the power relations between 'I', *People I* and *People II* can be summarized as I has the power and has problematized the relations and actions between the two types of people. 'I's' problematization suggests their relations as dirty and smelly, because *People II* are shitting, and thus *People I* are polluted by this. Expanding this SFL result by using a CDA lens, it is then possible to understand what those relations and actions imply in reality,

and that is the Writer A (as the *actor I*), who is problematizing the role of the Chinese public authority and those individuals who support the Chinese system.

To conduct a CDA analysis, it is necessary to know what happened in A's microblog before this particular post. As introduced in the methodology and discussed in Chapter 4, what had occurred in A's microblog between December 2013 and January 2013 was a prolonged contentious debate between A with pro-American/anti-Chinese views, and those who held opposing views. This clash of opinions regarding the American versus the Chinese system developed over time, and in this process, participants in these debates did not agree on a rational argument, but rather, there was a build-up of anger and tension, with this particular blog as the climax of the whole debate. In it, A chose to use a linguistically violent metaphor to attack those individuals who disagreed with his position, and to problematize the system in China that created those individuals. Such a context helps to clarify who was involved in the exchange.

In this entire debate, A stood firmly on the anti-Chinese side, while those disagreed with his views mainly had pro-Chinese views. It was these individuals, when debating with A, who used swear words to humiliate A. If this position and relation is associated with the discourse in A's post, then it becomes clear that *People I*, who were described by A as having humiliated others and who he would like to 'accuse', were those individuals with pro-Chinese attitudes who attacked him because of differences in political values. Then, judging by the crucial 'above-under' relation between *People II* and *People I*, as well as *People I*'s attitude, namely, defending the Chinese system, *People II*, this research argues, refers to the Chinese public authority, in other words, the CCP government, because it is the Chinese public authority who governs the country from 'above' and it is also the Chinese public authority that *People I* tried to defend. Other evidence in support of this analysis is A's

description of *People II* as ‘shitting’, and *People I*, who had spoken on their behalf, were made ‘smelly and dirty’ because of these ‘shits’. The key actor that *People I* spoke for in the debate was the Chinese public authority, and it was also the Chinese public authority that was disliked or even despised by A. Such strong hostility makes it clear that *People II* refers to the Chinese public authority.

Having established the roles of these *actors*, it then becomes clear that A has tried to construct through the discourse is the relation between him, the people with pro-Chinese agenda and the Chinese authority. What he has achieved through the discourse is to occupy a position that is not with the people with pro-China agenda, nor the Chinese government. By adopting this position, he self-determines his role as a distanced observer of the relationship between the Chinese government and the people who still believe in it. He then challenges and problematizes them, first by attacking the individuals with pro-Chinese views, by saying they are ‘smelly and dirty’ and constructs a powerless position for those individuals as passive receivers of the shit. He then humiliates the Chinese public authority, by saying they are ‘riding’ on the people’s ‘neck’ and ‘shitting’ on them. It should also be noted that, although A problematizes both the people and the Chinese public authority, the fundamental concern that is constructed in this expression is still the Chinese authority. Such an authority is constructed as powerful but shitting, and is the source of pollution. He also suggests that individuals have ‘no need to be together’ with the Chinese public authority, which implies that only by leaving the Chinese public authority, can individuals be clean and civilised.

Through use of language, a strong sceptical view towards the Chinese public authority emerges, conveying that for A, the Chinese public authority has no legitimacy, but is simply a group of people riding on other people’s neck and shitting. Those shits impact on individuals who are supportive of the Chinese system, thus becoming smelly and dirty. Meanwhile A, himself, as an

individual with anti-Chinese agenda, clearly sees and then problematizes this ‘dirty’ relationship between the ‘shitting’ Chinese system and the individuals who nonetheless defend this ‘shitting’ system. In expressing such strong anti-Chinese opinions, A does not give a rationale for his argument. In other words, although he critically challenged the Chinese political system by suggesting the government is shitting on its people, he does not explain why he thought so, and why such an unpleasant relationship has been established. He offered an insulting metaphor which clearly conveys humiliation and contention, but not a rational explanation behind this problematization.

The function of such insulting and aggressive language, this research suggests are twofold. Firstly, it enabled A’s self-defined opinions towards the Chinese public authority and its people, to be voiced in the public domain. Secondly, such opinions were expressed in A’s self-chosen way to best reveal his anger and condemnation. They both contribute to the structure of the *problematization of unquestioned areas* and the *expressional political functions* of the online public sphere, because it demonstrates that there is space for individuals to question, challenge and even attack the Chinese government and its system. Such attacks were facilitated by the online public sphere, thus becoming a part of online political communication in China.

However, it is also important to acknowledge the down side of this kind of language use: although A expressed strong anti-Chinese views, he did not directly refer to the Chinese system or the CCP. Instead, he used an ironic metaphor to humiliate and attack ‘people’, without mentioning who these ‘people’ were. One therefore needs to be familiar with the development of the debate in his microblog and A’s attitudes to understand what he actually meant. Otherwise, one could read the post as merely an insulting diatribe regarding the relationship between two types of people. His choice to use metaphor could be viewed as simply personal style, but it could also be related to censorship in China. By avoiding the use of any sensitive words, his post

would probably not be picked up by Sina's monitoring system and therefore stands a better chance of remaining in the online public sphere. This use of language can therefore be seen as a strategy that A, and many others adopt in order to survive under censorship. On the one hand, this proves that Chinese individuals have not given up fighting for more spaces for self-determined opinions; but it also shows that censorship still impacts on the way individuals express themselves.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has discussed the structure of the *problematization of unquestioned areas* and the *expressional political function*. It found that these two elements of the online public sphere can be seen as structured in ways that enable individuals to self-determine the meaning of particular governmental policies and of the Chinese political system in their online debates around both domestic and international issues. Net-users were able to challenge the governments' decisions on particular issues, and indeed problematize the entire CCP regime. Linguistic violence plays a significant part in individual expressions: it is used to express opinions in self-determined ways, and to critically ridicule and attack the public authority through ironic metaphors.

But it should be noted that the structure of these two elements are limited, in the sense that the local authority has been problematized far more than the national one, and particular policies have been challenged more than the political system itself. Nonetheless, through such problematization, the online public sphere allows individuals to re-define the meaning of particular decisions and to achieve occasional effects; but is less likely to enable individuals to challenge the system itself that allows these kinds of decisions to be taken, and is unable to change this system to better serve the public

needs. While the use of linguistic violence in the online public sphere can be regarded as individual language choice, it can also be seen as a way to avoid censorship in China's online political communication. Individuals cleverly twist language as an act of resistance against the government, but this still shows that the online public sphere is not a place where individuals can express their opinions freely and directly, but rather, a place that requires finding indirect ways that avoid censorship.

Chapter 6. The Structure of the *Corresponding Political Function* in the Online Public Sphere in China

Introduction

The previous two sections focused on the structures of the three institutional criteria and the *expressional political function* in China's online public sphere. They discussed the power relations between participants in the online public sphere, to assess the level of equality and inclusiveness of the debates; and discussed the issues debated and the discourse individuals used in those debates to voice their self-determined opinions of the government and its decisions, and to communicate their concerns. Overall, discussions are made towards the public actions and relations of those who engage in political communication to exchange opinions with others, and to inform the government about their concerns and needs. Besides the public use of the online public sphere, the government's involvement in and control over the public sphere are also factors which determine its structure. Because it is through the interaction between the public and the government that the public sphere functions as a communicative space in the society.

This chapter focuses on the Chinese government's actions towards the online public sphere in China, by using the analytical lens of the *corresponding political function* of public sphere theory. It draws on Habermas's (1989: 74) idea of the public sphere 'as a functional element in the political realm was given the normative status of an organ for the self-articulation of civil society with a state authority corresponding', but is critically adopted to China's context. Two aspects of the Chinese government's actions will be discussed: one is control, and the other, engagement and response. These two aspects are both indispensable, and this chapter focuses primarily on engagement and response. Studies about control and censorship show the limitations of the

online public sphere, while discussions about engagement of and response from the government brings out the possibilities and potentials of the public sphere. By understanding both, the discussion about the role of the government in the online political communication through the online public sphere will be more concrete.

This research regards the government's actions of control and censorship as the context for the online political communication in China. This context has been repeatedly discussed in previous academic studies (such as Yang, 2009, Chan, 2003, Hassid, 2008, Wang and Ang, 2010), but still all studies focus on the roles and actions of the Chinese government need to include an understanding of these contextual aspects. The approach this research has taken is to study government control and censorship through interpreting and comparing regulations at national level, and those in the Sina Microblog and Tianya BBS. These regulations are: The National People's Congress Standing Committee's Decision on Safeguarding of Internet Security (2001), Sina Community's Rules and Regulations, and Tianya BBS's Users' Convention. To study regulations is to study the legal framework which the government refers to when informing the public about their definitions of sensitive and forbidden information and opinions, and the procedures in place to deal with them. The purpose of this particular approach is to discuss the context of control more specifically: since the three cases in this research took place on Sina and Tianya, so rather than talking about control in general, it is necessary to specifically understand controls on these two platforms, and then discuss how such controls might impact the debates that take place on their platforms. The three regulations were compared using discourse analysis in order to establish how control and censorship are defined, what contents are subject to control and censorship in online political communications, how regulations at the website level inherit and reinforce national regulations, and who are empowered in what ways through those regulations.

By understanding this context, the research then moves beyond the context to investigating the less-studied, but equally important aspect: whether government would engage and respond to public concerns, and if so, how. To do this, this chapter firstly discusses how local and national authorities react to the online political communications about the Kunming oil refinery plant as a way of understanding how the government engages with and responds to particular issues that are discussed in the online political communications.

This chapter also focuses on how the public authority engages with and responds to popular forms of linguistic violence in online political communications. This discussion is necessary, because it coheres the study of the online public sphere in China as a whole. To explain: as shown in the analysis of *problematization of unquestioned areas* and the *expressional political function*, linguistic violence is an important and popular phenomenon in online political communication in China, which contributes significantly to individual problematization of unquestioned areas, and the expression of concerns. It is an important way for individuals to debate about the government and communicate with each other. Furthermore, the use of linguistic violence highlights a critical public concern in the online political communication in China, and that is how one conducts debate under censorship. As this research has shown, linguistic violence enables individuals to twist their language into violent, ironic and critical ways, so that issues can be problematized and their concerns about those issues can be expressed without necessarily mentioning any sensitive terms. Thus any challenges directed at the government can be expressed and made visible in the public domain. Having established how linguistic violence contributes to the structure of the *problematization of unquestioned areas* criterion and the *expressional political function*, this analysis can and should go further to study how the government reacts towards linguistic violence, as well as the public concern that lies behind it. This enables a coherent analysis that links

both political functions of the sphere. Also, linguistic violence creates chaos in the online political communications, as individuals use language as a weapon with which to attack and humiliate, and their targets include the government. As Chinese government often worries crowd violence can go out of control and lead to social instabilities, and thus carefully watch and control it (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013: 237-238, Steinhardt, 2015: 122-125), how the Chinese public authority engages and responds to online linguistic violence, is a crucial, but as yet under-researched perspective on the public authority's behaviour and actions towards the online political communications in China.

Thus, in this research, government engagement with and response to online linguistic violence is analysed by firstly calculating numbers of articles around the use of violent language in the online debates published in the website of the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), in order to find out whether the government has talked about the phenomenon or not. Then a published Survey Report on Online Vulgar Language by People.com. cn, the first officially published paper that specifically discusses the use of rude, aggressive and humiliating words in online debate, is analysed by using discourse analysis.

6.1 Censorship and Regulations

As reviewed in the literature chapters and touched on in previous discussions about the institutional criteria and *expressional political function*, the online political communications in China can only be discussed by taking into account the role of government regulation, monitoring and censorship. Therefore, to assess the structure of the *corresponding political function* of the online public sphere, this section takes the government control and censorship as a key context. To suggest it is a context, because as previous

studies (such as Wu, 1996:700- 701, Li, 2010: 73-74, Tai, 2014: 186, Rosen, 2010: 509) have shown, since the Internet was introduced to China, the Chinese government has installed a number of regulations, and taken various actions to maintain their control over the flow of online information, discussions and discourses. As a result, in contemporary China, when individuals are debating online, they are debating in an already controlled and regulated context. So the question is not whether there is censorship and regulations or not, but rather, how each website sets their own regulations under the regulations of the national government, how such regulations define censorship, who is empowered through those regulations, and how effectively the regulations are enforced.

A more specific and explicit approach is then taken by analysing three pieces of regulation: The National People's Congress Standing Committee's Decision on Safeguarding of Internet Security (2001), Sina Microblog Community Convention, and Tianya BBS's Users' Convention. NPCSC's 2001 decision is analysed because it is a fundamental landmark in conveying the Chinese government's attitudes and action towards online public debate and other regulations of the Internet are informed by this document (Zhang, Zhang and Liu: 2015). Sina Community's Rules and Regulations and Tianya BBS's Users' Convention are examples of how China's two most popular online interactive sites demonstrate their attitudes and actions towards online public debate on their own websites. While Sina and Tianya cannot be seen as public authorities, they operate under the same national regulations.

Not all the text of the regulations were found to be about control over information and censorship. Thus, in order to look at control and censorship, the analysis first uses the key word information (信息), to identify text in the regulations that specifically talked about the identification of sensitive information, and the procedures to deal with such information.

The following three charts outline them:

**Chart 6.1 Texts in National People's Congress Standing Committee's
Decision on Safeguarding of Internet Security (2001) on Control and
Dealing with Sensitive Information**

| | |
|--|--|
| Texts define sensitive information | <p>'Using the Internet to make rumours, or publish and spread other harmful information, to instigate overthrow of China's political regime or socialist system; to instigate separation of the nation, and harm unity of the nation....' (利用互联网造谣、诽谤或者发表、传播其他有害信息，煽动颠覆国家政权、推翻社会主义制度，或者煽动分裂国家、破坏国家统一)</p> |
| Text defining the role of authorities | <p>Relevant administrative departments need to strength promotion and education of Internet security and information security, effectively conduct supervision and management according to the laws....' 有关主管部门要加强对互联网的运行安全和信息化安全的宣传教育，依法实施有效的监督管理.....</p> <p>Companies in the Information industry need to conduct actions according to the law, and when they discover behaviours that are against the laws, and harmful information, need to take action to stop the spread of harmful information, and report to relevant authorities in a timely manner. 从事互联网业务的单位要依法开展活动，发现互联网上出现违法犯罪行为和有害信息时，要采取措施，停止传输有害信息，并及时向有关机关报告。</p> <p>When using the Internet, all organisations and individuals need to obey the laws and regulations, to boycott all kinds of harmful, unlawful, criminal behaviours and information. 任何单位和个人在利用互联网时，都要遵纪守法，抵制各种违法犯罪行为和有害信息。</p> |

Chart 6.2 Texts in Sina Microblog Community Convention on Control and Dealing with Sensitive Information

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Text defining sensitive information</p> | <p>Users cannot publish politically harmful information, the information include:</p> <p>According to the laws and regulations, information that harm national and social security:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Against principles in constitutional laws; 2. Harm the unity of nation and the sovereignty of territory 3. Leak national secrets, harmful to the national security or harmful to the national honours and interest; 4. Instigate ethnic hatred, racism, harm the unity of ethnics, or harm ethnic customs and habits 5. Harmful to the national religion policies, promote religious cults and superstition; 6. Spread rumours, disturb social orders, harmful to social stabilities; 7. Spread gamble, violence, horrors killing or instigate crimes 8. Instigate unlawful meetings, organisation, protests, walks, crowd behaviours that disturb social orders 9. Other contents that are forbidden by laws and regulation <p>用户不得发布时政有害信息，时政有害信息主要包括：</p> <p>（一）根据现行法律法规，危害国家及社会安全的信息，主要表现为：</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 反对宪法确定的基本原则； 2. 危害国家统一、主权和领土完整； 3. 泄露国家秘密、危害国家安全或者损害国家荣誉和利益； 4. 煽动民族仇恨、民族歧视，破坏民族团结，或者侵害民族风俗、习惯； 5. 破坏国家宗教政策，宣扬邪教、迷信； 6. 散布谣言，扰乱社会秩序，破坏社会稳定； 7. 宣扬赌博、暴力、凶杀、恐怖或者教唆犯罪； 8. 煽动非法集会、结社、游行、示威、聚众扰乱社会秩序； 9. 含有法律、行政法规和国家规定禁止的其他内 |
|---|--|

| | |
|---|---|
| | 容。 |
| Text defining procedures to deal with breaching of regulations | <p>Microblog will manage the unlawful information under the management of local policy and according to the relevant laws and regulations.</p> <p>For daily unlawful information, microblog will deal with contents and accounts contain unlawful information according to the requirements of government administration</p> <p>微博在属地公安机关的管理下并根据相关法律法规实施对违法信息的管理。</p> <p>针对违法信息的日常管理，微博将根据主管部门的要求对包含违法信息的内容和账号进行依法处置并公示</p> |

Chart 6.3 Texts in Tianya BBS's Users' Convention on Control and Dealing with Sensitive Information

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|--|--|
| Text defining sensitive information | <p>Users' discourses and opinion cannot contain the following contents:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Against principles in constitutional laws; 2. Harmful to the national security, leak national secrets, instigate overthrow of the China's political regime, harm the unity of the country; 3. Harmful to the national honours and interest; 4. Instigate ethnic hatred, racism, harm the unity of ethnics; 5. Harmful to the national religion policies, promote religious cults and superstition; 6. Spread rumours, disturb social orders, harmful to social stabilities; 7. Spread pornography, gamble, violence, horrors or instigate crimes 8. Humiliate or defame others, harm others' lawful rights and benefits 9. Organise activities under unlawful organisations 10. Other contents that are forbidden by laws and regulation <p>会员的言论不得含有下列内容：</p> <p>(一)违反宪法确定的基本原则的；</p> <p>(二)危害国家安全，泄露国家秘密，颠覆国家政权，破坏国家统一的；</p> <p>(三)损害国家荣誉和利益的；</p> |
|--|--|

| | |
|---|--|
| | (四)煽动民族仇恨、民族歧视，破坏民族团结的； (五)破坏国家宗教政策，宣扬邪教和封建迷信的； (六)散布谣言，扰乱社会秩序，破坏社会稳定的； (七)散布淫秽、色情、赌博、暴力、恐怖或者教唆犯罪的； (八)侮辱或者诽谤他人，侵害他人合法权益的； (九)煽动非法集会、结社、游行、示威、聚众扰乱社会秩序的； (十)以非法民间组织名义活动的； (十一)含有法律、行政法规禁止的其他内容的。 |
| Text defining procedures to deal with breaching of regulations | <p>If users have published discourse and opinions that were against the regulations. Convention administrators have the power to delete all or parts of the discourses and opinions; and punish those behaviours according to the circumstance and the negative impacts caused by them.</p> <p>会员在社区内发表违规言论的，社区公职人员有权删除其全部或部分言论，并视情节和危害结果，对其给予适当的处罚。</p> |

The above charts show that regulations at both national and website levels contain clauses that define what would be regarded as sensitive and harmful information, and also indicate the attitudes and suggested actions with regards to sensitive information. The regulations are written to reinforce the needs of the Chinese government, as they emphasise control over the flow of online information and of online communications. They prevent individuals from publishing information that they regard as harmful and challenging to the CCP political regime, and censor them according to their own judgements. The regulations are also written to protect the authority from being challenged by net-users.

Among these three, the NPCSC's regulations act as the fundamental regulatory framework for both the government and the website. Such a fundamental position is determined not only because the piece, as suggested previously, is one of the first to be published by the Chinese government with

specific regards to online political communication, but also because this piece sets out the fundamental agenda of the legal framework, which has then been loyally taken on, followed and obeyed by the websites. For example, wording used in the NPCSC decision, such as ‘make rumours’, information that is ‘harmful’ to ‘instigate the overthrow of China’s political regime or socialist system; to ‘instigate separation of the nation, and harm the unity of the nation....’, have been copied or partly copied by Tianya and Sina, when writing their regulations. They have inherited the government’s definitions of the harmful information, and reinforce that their actions will be fully according to the national laws and regulations. Both websites clearly adopt the same position with regards to the public authority in terms of monitoring and censoring the information on their servers, to ensure that the information published on their websites is in line with the authority’s agenda and interests.

These regulations inform users that the publication, exchange or access to information on Tianya and Sina, that can be considered as rumours, as harmful, or as challenging the political regime and questioning the unity of the nation will be categorised as sensitive. It is not only the government administration who is responsible for stopping the publication, access and spread of this kind of information, but the originators and individuals net-users. What is published and accessed online is constantly monitored at multiple levels by the authorities and the websites, to prevent ‘harmful’ and sensitive information to be publicly available. This confirms Lee (2015: 120), Li (2010: 69), Wang and Hong (2010: 73), and Harwit and Clark (2001: 395)’s observations that the national government determines the bottom-line of online communication in terms of what cannot be said, while the websites self-censor themselves to carefully follow the bottom-line, to ensure the public authority’s interests are served.

What the three pieces also show is that, although the NPCSC defines certain information as harmful, the definition of what is considered harmful is not

specified. The regulations refer to information that ‘instigates the overthrow of China’s political regime or socialist system’ or ‘harm national honour and interest’, but no specific or explicit explanations and definitions are offered on what exactly the harmful information could be, and through what processes, depending on what criteria, harmful information would be identified and categorised. This lack of specifics means that there is space for the websites and the government, as regulatory bodies, to interpret the regulations according to their needs. Because it is only the government and the website monitoring bodies who are involved in the processes and have powers to monitor and censor online information, so they can make case-by-case and subjective judgments; while individual net-users are left outside of this process, and become the passive receivers of the monitoring and control. It is not only the notion of ‘harmful information’ that is open to interpretation, but also information about the procedures in place to define and deal with the ‘harmful’ information. At national level, the National People’s Congress Standing Committee’s Decision refers to adherence to ‘other laws and regulations’ to deal with harmful information and online behaviours. But the exact processes, the rights of individuals and the powers of the regulatory bodies in those procedures, are not spelt out. In terms of the websites, there is very little said explicitly about the process, aside from stating that communities of individual websites are the organs that deal with the behaviours and information that violate the regulations; but how the communities would take action, and what rights the users of the website could have when facing this situation, are not mentioned. On Tianya, it is stated that the website administrators will deal with harmful information without informing the users, and on Sina, it states that in the case of information that obviously violates the regulations, the website will deal with it directly. Compared with the powers attributed to the authorities and the websites, none of the regulations mention individuals as having any power to define what

they regard as sensitive information, nor is there any appeal process against the monitoring bodies' decisions on censorship either.

Those regulations determine the government has the power to take action without taking net-users' opinions into account while net-users have very little power to resist any decisions. This has largely empowered the regulatory bodies, since the powers to define what is deemed unsuitable on online communications, and the power to deal with the information are all defined as being within the power of the authority, rather than the power of the net-users.

Individuals are thus debating in an environment, where they are informed about government monitoring and censorship, but they are not told when and how censorship will be actioned. As a result, any debate or piece of information that challenges the government's role and decisions on Tianya and Sina could be categorised as instigating the 'overthrow of China's political regime or socialism system', and censorship could be enforced according to the regulations. But also, because the regulations are so vague, judgements will need to be made on a case-by-case basis by the monitoring bodies, rather than there being a universal application for every case. If they decide to tighten control, then judgments about what counts as 'sensitive' will also be more strictly applied; if they decide to slightly loosen control, then the decision of what constitutes sensitive information will also be slightly relaxed. If the monitoring body determines the information is sensitive, they directly remove it, whereas if the monitoring body determines it is not-sensitive, then it can remain publicly available. Once contents have been censored, the decision is final, but if it is not censored, there is no guarantee they will not be censored in the future. But regardless of whether censorship occurs and when it occurs, only the public authority has the power to decide and all net-users can do is accept the decisions taken.

In these circumstances, the powers of the government are reinforced since it

has the power to determine what action is needed and the power to take those actions. This limits the structure of the online public sphere in China, because the online public sphere should be an arena in which individuals exchange and compete ideas and engage with the authorities to reflect their self-determined concerns and needs. It is an independent space in which individuals should be able to express their opinions freely and liberally. But within the Chinese context, opportunities for individuals to use the online public sphere to challenge the public authority are restricted since the public authority and the websites hold the power to determine how information should be defined and dealt with. The public authority can define certain information as 'harmful' according to their own judgments and needs, and remove or manipulate it. When censorship occurs, opinions that problematize the public authority are removed from the public domain, and political communication is limited.

The way regulations are written convey the public authority's intentions to control the online public sphere, and also the mechanisms they use to establish and reinforce such control. As has been argued, those regulations therefore shore up the government's powers, and reduce the power of the individuals. But this does not mean that regulation enforcement is absolute, leaving no space for alternative information; rather, enforcement can be seen as ambiguous and uncertain.

To give an example, the previous chapters focused on the content and discourses in communications about different political concerns and contentions. In all three cases, expressions that questioned the legitimacy of the Chinese political regime were identified. Yet not all of them were subjected to censorship. In the Kunming case, many of original posts had already been removed from Sina when this research was undertaken and only the posts in CCRN and 21st CER remained. Still, expressions that challenged the government and the party in CCRN and 21st CER's blogs were not

censored and were therefore collected as data for this research between 2013 and 2016. In Writer A's case, expressions that challenged the Chinese political regime were identified; Writer A not only portrayed the Chinese government as sitting on top of its people, but also encouraged individuals to leave this system by stating that the Chinese public and authority 'ought not be together'. If Sina's and NPCSC's regulations were enforced systematically, then those opinions would have been judged as sensitive information, as harming 'national honour' and as 'instigating the overthrow of China's political regime or socialism system'. Instead, those comments remained visible and open to reply to all Sina members throughout the observation period (between 2012 and 2014). This does not mean that censorship has never occurred in that debate, because one of the great difficulties of measuring censorship is that once certain information is censored, it disappears from the online debate, and it is therefore hard to identify its existence. Thus, in the case of writer A, this research only argues his opinions challenging the Chinese public authority remained visible over a 2 years-period on Sina Microblog. In other words, censorship within this period was not absolute, which therefore allowed alternative views to be visible and to be debated, as part of online political communication. However, no claims can be made about the period before or after the research with regards to censorship of content, as the judgement to censor or not is subjectively made by the authority, without clearly stating to the individuals what final decision is taken nor when exactly censorship would occur.

To sum up, this analysis of the laws and regulations at both national ones and those of individual websites, found that the public authority makes clear its intention to censor expressions that challenge the system and the government. The function of those regulations is to inform individuals of the possibility of censorship and the controls towards certain content, but do not offer explanations of what exactly will be censored, nor do they inform users as to

how these decisions can be challenged, or question the criteria used in the decision to censor. What can be regarded as sensitive information remains vague and generalised. Without this kind of detail, the establishment and enforcement of regulations are subjective and ambiguous, since they provide only general guidance; decisions about how online information and discussions should be monitored and censored are subjective and are made by the regulatory bodies on a case-by-case basis. As a result, the legislative framework emphasises the public authority's attitude towards censorship, but does not ensure the absolute enforcement of censorship. In some cases, all information that challenges the public authority is removed, whereas other equally challenging debates remain in the online sphere. What happens in one case is not universally applicable to all cases, and what does not occur in one case may well occur in other similar scenarios. Individuals are thus fully aware that state censorship can be applied to any challenge to the public authority's role and policies, but it is hard to know whether and when such censorship will occur: a debate may be censored immediately after it has taken place or it may not be censored at all.

In terms of the structure of the online public sphere, such uncertainty brings with it both limitations and opportunities. In terms of limitations, regulations that reinforce the control and power of the public authority undermines freedom of speech in the online public sphere, since individuals know that what they say will be monitored and censored by the state, rather than being regulated to engage and respond. Rather than regulating both the public authority and individuals in online political communication, the public authority is given a lot more power to determine how to deal with alternative voices, while individuals have not been given the power to fight against the government's decisions. As a result, rather than facilitating a legislated framework that allows the online public sphere to become an independent communicative space between the public and the state, the function of

regulation in China is more about limiting public debate in the online public sphere, ensuring that it remains within the control of government.

But alongside these limitations there are opportunities. Because the government and website monitoring bodies make case-by-case subjective judgments, rather than establishing absolute and systematic control, censorship is a possibility rather than a given. As in the case of Writer A, opinions that reflect individual concerns about the political regime in China can remain in the online public sphere, rather than being censored. Those uncensored contents become an important part of online political communication, allowing other individuals, as well as the public authority, to understand the needs of the public. Because of this, it is still possible to speak of an online public sphere in China.

6.2 The Public Authority's Engagement with and Response to Issues Debated in the Online Political Communication

In this research, censorship is regarded as a context within which online political communication takes place and is understood as one action that the public authority and individual websites can and have already taken with regards to online political communications. Having described this context, a further question is whether or not public authority engages with and responds to political communication online, and if so, how. This question is important, because as stated in the theoretical framework, it helps to strengthen current understanding about the online public sphere, to investigate the level to which the online public sphere can be seen as functioning as a communicative space that involves not only individuals but also the authorities.

To answer this question, this research set out to identify instances of government engagement and response to online political communications about the three cases discussed thus far. Only in the case of the Kunming oil

refinery was evidence found of government engagement, both local and national. Although the government made reference to both the comparisons between the American system and the Chinese system as debated in Writer A's case, and the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute debated in Tianya BBS, there is no evidence that this was as a direct result of the online debates described in this thesis.

Based on these observations, this research argues that engagement and response from the government, just like censorship, are not constantly applied to all debate. There are cases like Kunming where both censorship and engagement occurred; and others, like with Writer A and the debates in Tianya BBS, when the government does not appear to engage in either course of action.

In the Kunming case the government did engage, and so this section discusses that case in terms of what the government did, how they did it, and what those actions mean for the structure of the online public sphere in China.

Engagement with and response to public concerns about the Kunming oil refinery not only occurred in offline party media, whose function is to defend the public authority's interests, but also on Sina Microblog, opening up interaction between government officials and thousands of Sina users. The level of engagement and response demonstrates that the government began to acknowledge the importance of the online public sphere. Hearing that debates were taking place through the sphere that were challenging the government's decisions, the government not only acknowledged their existence but also attempted to use the same arena to talk to individuals, to answer individuals' questions and also to defend their own point of view. However, openly communicating through microblog only accounts for a small part of government engagement, since the dominant channel used by the government to defend its position remains the single-channel one-direct mass media and a refusal to engage in further conversations with the public. In the end, no

changes were made to the government's plans for the refinery. This shows that although the online public sphere is structured to allow debate between the public authority and individuals, it has not been powerful enough to push the government to change their decision in response to public concerns.

To unpack this further, the following sections firstly discuss how public authority engaged in the political communications about Kunming oil refinery and then the limitations of this engagement in the sense that engagement did not lead to a genuine and full response.

6.2.1 The Government's Engagement with Online Political Communication about the Kunming Oil Refinery through Party Media and Online Platforms

The Kunming case involved the proposed building of an oil-refinery. The unquestioned area and the contentions in this debate were that while the government defined the Kunming plant as forming part of the nation's energy strategy and as such, beneficial for the local economy; locals problematized this definition, and raised concerns about the possible environmental damage the refinery would cause. These concerns were discussed on the Sina Microblog, and as shown in Chapter 5, most of the blame for the decision was directed at the local government, with a few questioning the national government, and particularly the overall political system behind the decision-making process. After the concern was raised, both local and national government joined the debate with individuals, mainly using the party newspapers as platforms, but also involving other channels. The following table lists those different methods, used by both local and national governments.

Chart 6.4 Different Responses from Local and National Public Authorities to Concerns about the Kunming Oil-Refinery

| Local (Yunnan and Kunming) | National |
|--|---|
| 57 reports in the local party newspapers (Yunnan Daily and Kunming Daily) | 3 reports in the central party newspaper (People's Daily) |
| Public exhibitions of oil-refining and petrification knowledge between 25 th May to 10 th June | 3 programmes on central television |
| 5 public talks about oil-refining and PX productions by specialists and officers | |
| a trip to an oil refinery in Qinzhou (by selected public representatives) | |
| 1 press conference on 10 th May | |
| 2 open discussion panels each on 13 th and 21 st May | |
| Kunming Mayor's microblog | |

Chart 6.4 demonstrates that in the two-month period after the heated online political communications about the plant, the public authorities took multiple actions to communicate with the public about the oil refinery in Kunming. The party media was the most used channel. The Kunming Daily, the main party newspaper in Kunming city, reported the governments' actions and their opinions around the plant daily from 11th to 18th May, and then on 22nd, 23rd, 25th, 26th, 28th, 29th, 30th and 31st May, 2nd, 3rd, and 17th June 2013. The Yunnan Daily, the main party newspaper in Yunnan province, of which Kunming is the capital city, published daily reports about the plant from 11th to 15th May, and then on the 17th, 21st, 22nd, 23rd, 26th, 28th, 29th, 30th

May, and 4th, 25th, and 26th June, 2013. At national level, reports about the planned refinery were less frequent; nonetheless the People's Daily, the most central party media, covered the issue 3 times, on 8th, 15th and 24th May.

Other than reporting through the party media, the local government organised a range of other activities to engage with the public, including press conferences, discussion panels, public exhibitions, talks and field visits. These events were then reported by the two local party newspapers.

Because the party newspapers are the primary channels through which government attitudes and actions are reported, to find out what was said about the plant and the online debates around the plant by the government, this research examined the contents of the reports in those newspapers. Five categories were used to code the titles and the first paragraph of the reports, where the central themes of the reports are often introduced. The analysis focuses on whether or not the plant is mentioned; and if so, is it associated with the environment/environmental protection (环境/环保), the resources strategies (能源战略), the economic (经济), the public/public opinions(民众/民意), or the Internet/net-users (网络/网民). The 5 codes are used to ascertain whether or not the reports can be seen as responding to the online political communications in Sina around this plant, in which the public problematized the plant and expressed their environmental concerns. The following table presents the results of this analysis.

Chart 6.5 Themes in Reports about the Kunming Oil-Refinery in The Kunming Daily, Yunnan Daily and People's Daily from May to June 2013

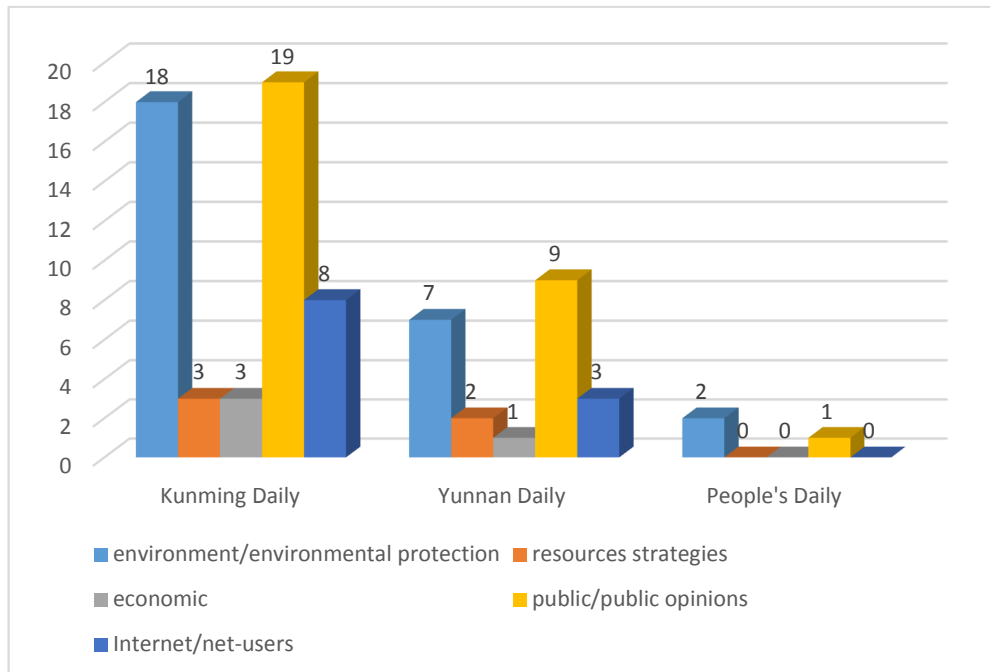
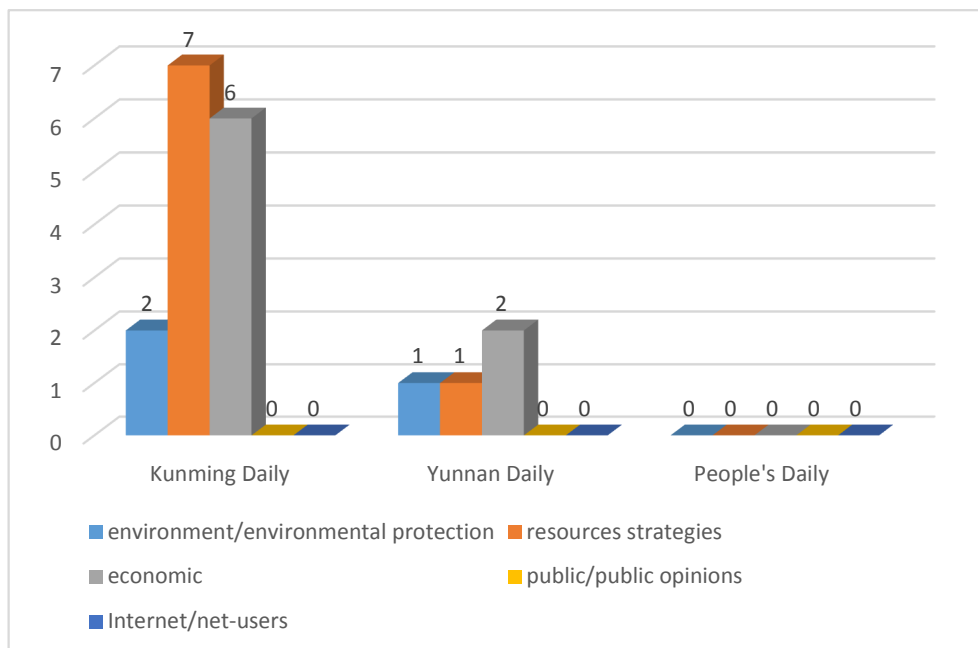


Chart 6.6 Themes in Reports about the Kunming Oil-Refinery in The Kunming Daily, Yunnan Daily and People's Daily Between January 2004 and April 2013, and from July to December 2013



From Charts 6.5 and 6.6, it can be seen that from May to June 2013, when reporting this plant, the term ‘public/public opinions’ appeared most frequently (29 times) in the three newspaper reports, followed by the term environment/environmental protection (27 times). But between January 2004 and April 2013, the themes ‘resource strategy’ and ‘the economy’ regarding the plant were mentioned the most (8 times each), whilst the environmental aspect was only mentioned 3 times, and public opinion and net-users were not mentioned at all. This indicates that before environmental concerns about the refinery were raised in online political communications in 2013, public opinion and environmental concerns were not major focuses in the party media. Instead, the economy and resources strategies were given more coverage, reflecting the public authority’s original definition of the plant. In 2013, after online political communications as well as offline protests made it clear that government decisions were being problematized and that the public had environmental concerns about the planned refinery, the party media started to pay attention to public opinion and the environment. In other words, the government started to engage with the public on the environmental issues through the party media is a result of the public’s problematization and expressions in online debates. This changing focus in the party media demonstrates the function of the online public sphere: an unquestioned area was problematized in the online public sphere, informing the public authority about the public’s needs, prompting the authorities to engage in communication to address those public concerns it had ignored until that point.

Evidence of the online public sphere functioning in this way can also be found in the contents of the reports. For example, the first report from the party media to highlight public concern about the oil refinery following a heated debate online about the plant was on the 11th May in Kunming Daily, with the following title: “*Kunming City Held a Press Conference with regards to the CNPC Yunnan Oil-Refining Plan Yesterday/The Oil Refining Plan Insists on*

the Implementation of ‘One Vote Veto’ on Environmental Protection: The Whole Plan Does Not Have PX Device, Will Not Produce PX Products, Whether or Not Have Sub-Productions Will Follow Democratic Decision Procedures (昆明市昨日就中石油云南炼油项目举行新闻发布会/炼油项目坚持‘环保一票否决制’: 整个项目不含PX装置, 也不生产PX产品, 副产品配套项目上不上将走民主决策程序’). The first sentence of the report suggested that ‘a few citizens and net-users have questioned whether the plan would impact on the environmental standards in Kunming’.

The report shows that, when the central party newspaper in Kunming firstly and formally approached the issue of the oil refinery, the public concern and environmental protection rather than in terms of the economy and resource strategy became the focuses. The title of the report stresses the “‘One Vote Veto’ on Environmental Protection” of the plant, while suggesting ‘democratic decision procedures’ to determine the sub-production of the plant. As the title stands, the key agenda of the report is environmental protection: ‘one vote veto’, means that if there were environmental problems, production would not be allowed to commence, thus reassuring the public that their concerns had been taken into consideration. The report also invites people to engage in the decision-making process regarding the sub-production of the plant, helping to give the impression that the government respects the public decision about sub-production. Nothing is said about the plant in relation to the national resource strategy, or economic development. The first sentence reports that Kunming’s local government held a press conference to respond to public concern raised by locals and net-users, with regards to the environmental impact of the plant. This shows that it is online political communication in the Sina Microblog that led to government engagement and response, that it was online political communication that pushed the authorities to hold a press conference in order to address public concerns about the environment.

The changing themes and contents of the reports show the Chinese government engaging and responding to issues problematized and expressed in the online political communications, thereby showing the *corresponding political function* of the online public sphere in China. This is because the *corresponding political function* of the public sphere is about the government engaging with and responding to public expressions and concerns, in order to best serve the public needs. In this case, by focusing on the environmental aspect and public opinion in communications about the plant, between May and June 2103, and by specifically mentioning the online debates about the plant, the Chinese government recognised the existence of online public debates for the first time, and showed a willingness to get involve in conversations with the public in order to discuss concerns raised in those debates. In this process, interactions between the public and the public authority were established in which the public was able to challenge the authority through the online public sphere and then the authority engaged and responded to such challenges. The function of the public sphere as a communicative space between the two was therefore realised.

What also contributes to the structure of the *corresponding political function* of the online public sphere in this case is that the Kunming Mayor used the Sina Microblog to engage with net-users regarding the oil-refining plant. This not only demonstrates the government's willingness to respond to public concerns raised through the online public sphere, but also that local officials were also attempting to engage with the public by using Sina, one of the most important online platforms in China. As analysed in previous chapters, online political communications around the oil-refinery took place on Sina Microblog. Understanding this to be a key arena for communication, Kunming's Mayor opened a microblog account on 17th May 2013, and became the first mayor in China to have an official microblog account. The

purpose of his microblog was not only to respond to issues raised about the oil-refinery, but also, as his first microblog post suggests ‘to listen to your opinions about Kunming’s development (倾听你们对昆明建设发展的意见)’, and to ‘carefully study the advices and suggestions made by the crowd (认真研究大家提出的意见和建议)’. Nonetheless, public concern about the oil refinery was clearly the main factor behind his decision to open an account. The third post to be posted from this account considered the oil refinery, and in total, 11 posts specifically focused on the plant in this microblog. Furthermore, a report published in the Kunming Daily on the 18th May suggested that the oil refinery was the biggest concern in the microblog (Li, 2013b: Page A1).

As a microblog user on Sina, the Mayor was given recognition for his status as a personal VIP. As discussed in Chapter 4, Sina users with personal VIP status sharing the same fundamental rights as non-VIP users. So in this arena, the mayor has the power to access, to post, to comment and to retweet, as ways to express his opinions. At the same time, because other users have the same powers, they can talk to and even challenge the Mayor as equals, and all those opinions are inclusively visible to all. Certainly, the issue of censorship needs to be taken into account, since Sina regulates all the debates that occur on its platform, so as discussed earlier in this chapter, there is always the possibility that opinions challenge the Mayor will be censored. Nonetheless, Sina Microblog provides an arena where it is not only the Mayor who talks, but other net-users have the chance to react and read the reactions of other net-users. In this arena, opinions are exchanged among users through posts, comments and retweets, rather than the one sided pre-dominated communications which exclude alternative views. Both the Mayor and other net-users are equal participants in this space, inclusively accessing and expressing opinions, rather than the Mayor having sole control over what is said and sole power to speak and to access information. Net-users have the

opportunity to talk directly to governmental officials, and the opinions from both the officials and the net-users are equally visible in the same arena.

The Mayor's engagement on Sina Microblog attracted further conversations about the plant. Despite censorship, the Mayor's 11 posts about the Kunming plant, generated a total of 14752 retweets and 20855 comments. These numbers demonstrate that this was not a one-way communication, but rather, an equal and inclusive interaction between the mayor and individuals reading and reacting to his talks in the online space.

It is an interaction which illustrates a key function of the online public sphere as a communicative space between individuals and the public authority. The public authority and other Sina users communicated in the same arena around a public concern raised in the online public sphere, with both sides sharing principally equal rights to speak, and where opinions were inclusively visible to all. It shows the government, or at least the local government, not only recognising the existence of the online public sphere, but also beginning to use this same sphere to engage with individuals. The communicative function of this sphere is directly fulfilled in this process, since both sides participated equally inside this sphere.

This section has argued that the Kunming case is generally positive indication with regards to the structure of the online public sphere in China, but there are limitations to the government's engagement with and response to the Kunming debate, which are explored in the next section.

6.2.2 Limitations of Engagement and Response

Before discussing the limitations, it is important to acknowledge the positive aspects to the online political communications that took place around the Kunming oil-refinery: Chinese net-users problematized an unquestioned area

and voiced their concerns in the online public sphere. In response, the government engaged in discussion and communicated about those concerns. In this case, the function of the online public sphere as a communicative space between the government and the individuals was fulfilled. The purpose of this section is to discuss the ways in which their engagement was limited and how those limitations might impact on the structure of the *corresponding political function* of this sphere, through critically reflecting on the actions taken by the government, and the contents and language it used.

The government carried out multiple actions in relation to the issue, including using the party newspapers, holding press conferences, discussion panels, exhibitions and field trips to explain their decision and to communicate the benefits of the plant, and engaging in online discussions by opening a Sina Microblog account. However, the function of all those actions was to explain the public authority's definitions, to defend and reinforce their interests, to promote the governments' needs, in order to persuade individuals to accept the decision. The government did not invite individuals into a fully open conversation to seek the most reasonable solution regarding the plant. Nor did it change its decision over the plant in response to public concerns. Therefore while the government's actions can be regarded as an attempt to engage in political communications in the online public sphere, it cannot be regarded as fully responding to public concerns raised by this sphere. There are three ways in which the governments' engagement process was limited in this respect.

6.2.2.1 Different Attitudes Associated with Local and National Governments

The first sign is that a different association was created between local and national government: the decision made by the local government, namely to add sub-productions such as PX into the oil-refining plant, was regarded by local government as an area that could be negotiated in response to public

concern, whereas the national government's decision to have the oil-refinery itself was regarded as unchallengeable and as bringing only benefits. By separating those decisions, the legitimacy of the national government's decision was protected, and the concerns over the environmental impact of the plant were not fully addressed.

As discussed previously in this thesis, the oil-refining parts of this plant, including the pipeline and oil-refining factory, were associated with the national public authority's decision, as part of its national energy strategy; while decisions about sub-production parts, including PX production, was in the hands of the local government. In the public authority's communications about the plan, these two levels of associations were highlighted from the very beginning in the government's communications.

For example, the first report about the plant in Kunming's Daily as analysed previously was titled *"Kunming City Held a Press Conference with regards to the CNPC Yunnan Oil-Refining Plan Yesterday/The Oil Refining Plan Insists on the Implementation of 'One Vote Veto' on Environmental Protection: The Whole Plan Does Not Have PX Device, Will Not Produce PX Products, Whether or Not It Has Sub-Productions Will Follow Democratic Decision Procedures (昆明市昨日就中石油云南炼油项目举行新闻发布会/炼油项目坚持'环保一票否决制': 整个项目不含PX装置, 也不生产PX产品, 副产品配套项目上不上将走民主决策程序")*. This title only mentions sub-production, in particular PX production, but does not mention the environmental concerns over the oil-refinery itself. By omitting any decision about the oil-refinery, but only mentioning PX and sub-production, the 'democratic decision procedures' and the "'one vote veto' on environmental protection" are associated with sub-production, rather than the whole oil-refinery plant. This gave a clear signal that while sub-production activities that were determined by the local authority could be discussed, the oil-refinery itself as a decision taken by the national government, could not be

discussed.

Also, the first report of the plan on the 11th May 2013 in Yunnan Daily, the provincial party newspaper, was titled as '*Oil Refining Project Will Benefit National Strategies and People's Living, Standards Sub-Production Items Will Respect Public Opinions*' (炼油项目有利国计民生, 配套项目决策尊重民意). The title divided the issue in two parts: the oil refinery and the sub-productions. The oil-refinery was described as benefitting 'national strategies and people's living standard', thus only the positive aspects were mentioned; while decisions about PX production would 'respect public opinions'; in other words in the case of PX production, none of the benefits are mentioned but rather the emphasis is on the idea that individuals could have their say. This division was reinforced throughout this report. The discourse around the oil refinery were organised in such a way as to emphasize why it was necessary and important, and the possible environmental-friendly measures; but not to offer individuals any chance to determine whether to go ahead with the project or not. On the other hand, for sub-production, although the report also mentioned its benefits, the report clearly stated that 'public opinion could determine its existence'.

The message this report conveyed was that the local public authority was willing to reconsider PX production, in order to serve the public interests; the national public authority's decision, on the other hand, remained legitimate and unquestionable. By establishing different associations in the discourse with the two aspects of the plant, the picture the government drew for the public is that the public authority as a whole had listened to concerns expressed in the online debates, and had made local government abandon its plans to produce PX. What was left out of this picture was the national government's decision about the plant itself. The result of the different associations made in the discourse was that plans to build the oil-refinery still went ahead, without the PX and other sub-production activities; but

environmental damage can still be caused through the oil-refining process. The national public authority was able to reinforce its decisions remained unchallengeable. Though the public could problematize the national public authority's decision, there was no engagement on the part of that authority and so public concern over the environmental impact of the plant – the central contention – was only partially addressed served by the government.

6.2.2.2 The Use of One-Direction/Single-Channel

The second sign of the government's limited engagement is that, although the public authority started to communicate with individuals, it chose to communicate predominantly through a one-direction/single channel, rather than engaging in debate with individuals in an equal and inclusive institutionalised arena. Those channels allow the government to 'lecture' the public, so that information is only delivered from the government to the public, and the public has no chance to challenge or question the informant. By using this kind of channel, the government can communicate its own definition of the plant, to reinforce its pre-existing interests and to promote its interests further, rather than opening up a conversation in which diverse opinions can be equally and inclusively exchanged.

The traditional party mass media, public exhibitions and talks were all delivered in lecture style: information flowed from the authorities towards individuals, and left no space for individuals to directly challenge them on the same platform. The purpose was not to include different views which could be debated, but rather to use these channels as mouthpieces for the government's point of view. Thus, the public was informed about what the government believed was 'right' rather than being invited to debate what is 'right'. With regards to the press conferences, the two discussion panels and the field trip to Qinzhou oil refinery, the public authority also took a dominant role, selecting which media organisations and which individuals could

participate in these events. Participants were not selected by the public to problematize the government, but rather were selected and controlled by the government to fit in with its interests. The power to select what questions could be asked, what answers could be reported, where and how to report them, and even which factory individuals could visit, was entirely in the hands of the government. Questions and trips were designed to enable the government to justify its decision rather than to equally and inclusively present both the government's opinions and individuals' concerns. For example, among all the oil-refineries in China, only Qinzhou was selected because of being a relatively environmentally-friendly one; other non-environmentally-friendly ones, such as Lanzhou factory, were not selected. The aim of the trip was clearly to show the benefits of oil-refinery and to exclude any negative aspects. The microblog was the only open, equal and inclusive arena used by the public authority, but a minor one in this process.

By using single-channel/one-direction channels, power relations between individual and authority were fundamentally unequal. The government had sole power over the selection of the platform, the participants, and the channels through which to respond to individuals' concerns. By using those selected platforms and methods, they could also determine what opinions they wanted to be represented through them, rather than trying to facilitate a wider, inclusive and equalised debate. Thus although the government communicated to the public about the reasons behind their decision, and promised certain actions would be taken to respond to individual concerns about the environment, the contents of the communications were not produced through an equal and inclusive debate between the two sides, and the pre-existing interests of the government were reinforced more than individuals concerns. It is in this sense that government involvement can only be described as limited.

6.2.2.3 Lack of Follow-up Information and Failure to Keep Promises

The third limitation is that the government terminated communications about the plant, without the concerns being addressed. Communications about the plant from the government ceased after June 2013, and there was a general lack of follow-up information about construction of the plant, and about the promised actions. As a result, although the concerns and contention regarding the oil-refinery had not been resolved through the communications, the government was no longer willing to engage.

This argument is based upon the observation of a dramatic decrease in the numbers of reports in the party newspapers, and decrease of posts the Kunming Mayor's blog after June 2013. The following charts show this decrease:

Chart 6.7 Number of Articles about Kunming Oli Refinery from January to December 2013, in Yunnan Daily, Kunming Daily and Kunming Mayor's Microblog

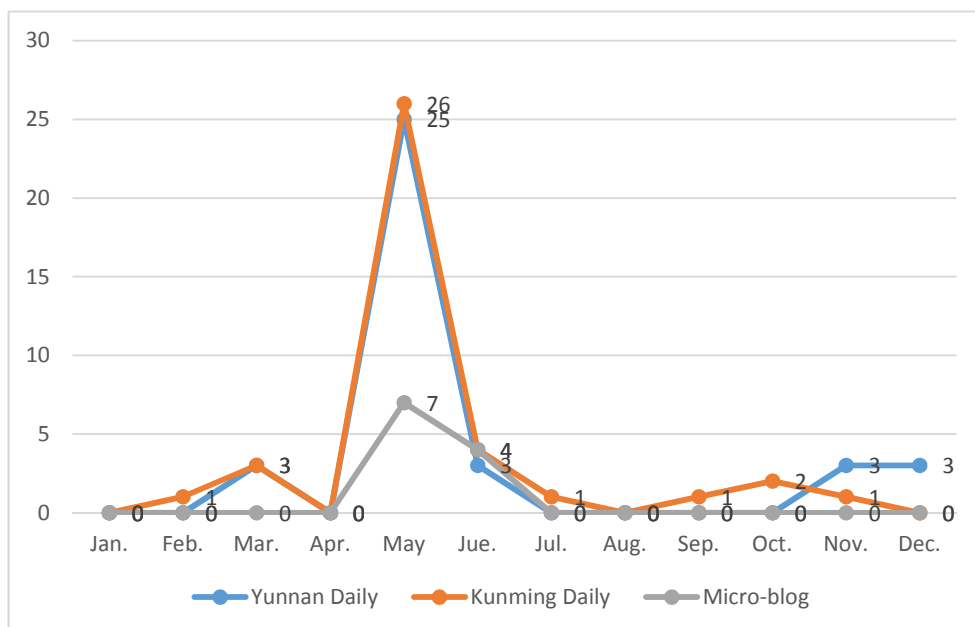


Chart 6.7 demonstrates that the government's response to public concerns had a time limit. In May 2013, the plan was a central topic in all three government

newspapers, the peak time in terms of the number of reports. After June 2013, there was a dramatic decrease. In the Kunming Daily and Yunnan Daily, there were only 11 reports in total between July and December 2013, while they had published 58 in May and June. Kunming's Mayor did not post any other microblogs about the proposed refinery after June. In fact, May and June 2013 was the only period during which information was provided in his microblog and there was engagement with users' posts. In other words, while the party media offered a great amount of information regarding the oil-refinery in that two-month period, after this period, information became minimal and almost invisible. Yet drop in number was not because the problem had been solved: public concerns over the plant were not fully addressed and the construction of the plant itself was not completed. Yet despite this lack of resolution and the unfinished construction, government's communications about Kunming oil refinery reduced dramatically after June 2013.

Although communications from the government more or less ceased after June 2013, public expressions of concerns over the plant, especially dissatisfaction towards the government's communications about the plant, continued after that date. Those expressions are observed in the Kunming Mayor's last microblog post regarding the plant, the only government-related platform where opinions could be shared in a relatively equal and inclusive way. This post, published on the 25th June 2013, states: 'Today, the provisional and city environmental protection departments published <CNPC Yunnan 10 Million Ton/Year Oil Refining Project Environmental Monitor Scheme> (website link), the purpose is to implement the supervision of the enterprise, and also shows the government's determination to enhance supervision, including state-owned enterprises, so everyone could be assured on this note, I share the same wishes with everyone. I have been clear on this point many times in the press conference, and discussion panels, please also supervise the government. (今天, 省、市环保部门公开了《中国石油云

南 1000 万吨/年炼油项目环境监管工作方案》(O 网页链接), 就是要落实好对企业的监管, 也表明政府对企业加强监管的决心, 包括对央企, 这点请各位放心, 我与大家的愿望是一致的。我曾在新闻发布会、恳谈会上多次表明了这一观点, 也请大家监督政府。)’

The focus of this post is the document <CNPC Yunnan 10 Million Ton/Year Oil Refining Project Environmental Monitor Scheme>, which announced the specific plan for monitoring the environmental impact of the oil-refinery. To reinforce the impression that the government intended to monitor any environmental impact, the post uses the term ‘supervision’ 3 times: firstly, in relation to the supervision of enterprise, then supervision of state-owned enterprises, and thirdly, in relation to the government itself. Through these three associations, the Mayor tried to reassure the public that the building of the plant and the production in this plant would be supervised by the government's environmental protection department. It also invites the public to supervise the government on this issue. The message delivered through this post is that the government understood that environmental impact was the public's biggest concern about the plant and had addressed this by making specific promises regarding the supervisions on environmental protection. The post shows that the government had engaged with online political communications, to talk about what they planned to do to respond to the public's needs.

However, although the government has promised for supervision, the post did not actually discuss how supervision would be conducted. Net-users picked up on this in their comments on and retweets of this post. The most frequent retweet regarding this post (14 times) suggests ‘Supervisions from social groups, individual citizens are absent, how it is possible to talk about effective supervision (社会团体、公民个人的监管缺失, 何谈有效监督)’. Through the retweeting of this comment, net-users showed they were not persuaded, despite government' documents, and promises of supervision. They

challenged the government's promises by pointing out that absence of supervision from social groups and citizens in China, arguing that given this absence, supervision could not be effective. Thus, the creditability of the government's words was problematized, and further questions were raised, demonstrating that there was a desire for further conversation with the government regarding environmental protection.

However, despite further problematization, no further posts appeared on the Mayor's microblog account. Individuals were not provided with any information regarding how the public authority would effectively supervise the plant or how the public would be empowered to supervise the government, and whether the promises made had been kept or not. What is more, the document that the Mayor had referred to, the <CNPC Yunnan 10 Million Ton/Year Oil Refining Project Environmental Monitor Scheme>, upon which his promises were made, went missing after June 2013, as when clicking the link, the page would show '404 Not Found', which suggests the page no longer exists²². The removal of this document, means the information it provided was effectively removed from the public domain, so its exact contents in terms of how supervision over the plant would be implemented in practice, was no longer accessible to the public. Thus, this is further evidence that while concerns continued to be expressed, the government no longer communicated in any way about the Kunming oil refinery.

Yet construction of the plant was still in process after June 2013, as parts of it had not been finished, namely, the sub-production parts. The party media

²² Kunming's Mayor's microblog post, Access through:

<http://www.weibo.com/3258074703/zD6I42RP8?type=comment>, Access on: 10/10/2014,
Ministry of Kunming Environment Protection (2011) *CNPC Yunnan 10 Million Ton/Year Oil Refining Project Environmental Monitor Scheme*
(*中国石油云南1000万吨年炼油项目环境监管工作方案*), in *Website of Ministry of Kunming Environment Protection*, Access through:
<http://hbj.km.gov.cn/2011kmhbj/148903561214820352/20130625/32614.html>, Access on: 01/09/2013, 10/10/2014 and 26/10/2014

reported that the government would invite a democratic process to determine whether or not to go ahead with the sub-production as a way of addressing public concerns (Hu, Sun and Li, 2013, Ma, 2013a). If the public authority had kept its promise, then there would have been further information about the construction process, and about a public consultation process of some kind that could take decisions regarding further developments of the plant, but none of them were materialise. The dramatic drop in reports, meant that no further information was published about the construction of the plant and no sign of the promised democratic procedure either. Thus individuals had no idea what had been built, where they could access further information about the plant, and how they would be able to monitor the plant.

It was not till August 2015 that the public were informed by a non-party newspaper that the plant had been fined by China's Ministry of Environmental Protection, because it had not put in place the environmental protection measures it had promised (South Urban Post: 2015). However, the fine imposed was negligible and the plant continued to operate without any measures being put in place. After two years during which little information about the plant had been imparted and with no public monitoring in place, the plant had not installed the promised measures to reduce pollution, and the government failed to supervise construction to ensure that those measures were in place. These empty promises did not solve environmental concerns about the plant. Indeed, concern about the environmental impact only intensified.

In this sense the government engagement was limited because although they engaged in communication, this engagement did not lead to any action.

To sum up, this section has analysed both the positive signs and the limitations in government engagement with public concerns raised through the online political communication. It can be argued that *the corresponding political*

function of the online public sphere is partly structured in that the Chinese government engaged in communications with net-users about public concerns. The government acknowledged the existence and importance of the online public sphere, not only in talking about issues raised in that sphere, but also by using the sphere to communicate with the public. However, the extent to which those communications led to changes in policy is less clear. The public authority has the power to determine its actions towards the online public sphere, by removing key information, by choosing to engage or not. The structure of the online public sphere is not powerful enough to pressure the government into serving the public interests and needs through engagement and response.

The analysis carried out in this section contributes to understanding of the structure of the *corresponding political function* but only partially. As has been argued, to understand the structure of the online sphere in China, both content and language use need to be analysed. This is true not only for the *problematization of unquestioned areas* criteria and the *expressional political function*, the focus of the previous chapter, but also for the *corresponding political function*. This will be the focus of the next section.

6.3 The Government's Engagement with Online Linguistic Violence

Chapter 5 argued that linguistic violence is an important and popular phenomenon in online political communications in China, and one which serves a key function in the structure of the *problematization of unquestioned areas* and *expressional political function* of the online public sphere. Individuals use it as a self-determining mechanism in problematizing unquestioned areas, to reinforce their views, to convey their feelings, and to

express political opinions. They were found to be particularly popular in the indirect expression of strong anti-government opinions through irony and/or metaphors. They enable net-users to problematize the Chinese public authority, and enable those expressions to be visible in the public domain. Linguistic violence was also found to be a useful tool in a context of censorship: individuals who, despite being aware censorship, still wish to express strong political opinions and feelings, are able to use linguistic violence as a way of avoiding censorship, thereby resisting and indeed challenging the government's control over online discourse. Given its important function in the public sphere, it is important to examine how the government engages and responds to linguistic violence.

In general, the public authority is well aware that of linguistic violence in online political communication. Yet despite the chaos and violence that the use of linguistic violence can create in communication and despite the fact that it is often the public authority is the target of the violence, not all instances of linguistic violence are censored. Instead, the public authority has left the space open, enabling linguistic violence to exist and indeed, flourish, and in this process, individuals' language choices in expressing their views are recognised and acknowledged. Based on this recognition, the public authority has also started to discuss the use of linguistic violence in online political communications, conveying its views about linguistic violence. By doing so, it engages with online linguistic violence in the sense that, rather than simply standing in a position of controlling and censoring, it attempts to interact with individuals, to communicate about the issue.

Overall, the public authority has attempted to discourage linguistic violence in online political communication, by portraying the decision to use it as in poor-taste, un-civilised and vulgar. On the other hand, it has not engaged with the wider political context behind linguistic violence, namely, the heavily censored arena that led to individuals choosing linguistic violence in the first

place. In engaging with online linguistic violence in this way, the public authority has shown its preference for non-violent expression in online political communications; but on the other hand, it avoids addressing the political concerns that are raised through linguistic violence. Thus, although there is engagement, it tends to consist in communicating its own interests to individuals, rather than fully responding to the public concerns that lie behind linguistic violence. There are parallels with the Kunming case in government's approach to linguistic violence.

To explain this, it is necessary to briefly re-visit the context behind the popular usage of linguistic violence. As argued in the literature review, the context in China is not one in which individuals are offered liberal choices between rational-critical debates and linguistic violence. Rather, there is a lack of a social and political system that values rational-critical debate; in this highly censored environment, individuals seek alternative but safer ways to express their critical political opinions. In these circumstances, linguistically violence becomes an easy and safe choice.

As indicated by other academics in the field, the growing use of the Internet is providing individuals with more opportunities to express their opinions using languages they feel comfortable with. But there was little evidence of the ability to engage in rational-critical debates. The idea of having a rational exchange of opinions and the ability to engage in this kind of interaction is not common among Chinese net-users (Yang, 2003b: 473, Li, 2010:73-74). Also, to have a rational-critical debate, individuals need to have a certain amount of knowledge about the issues, need to be able to explain themselves using objective evidence, and develop an argument based upon this knowledge, through reasoning. When individuals have strong opinions, but do not have much knowledge or are not good at rational explanations, it is hard to engage in rational-critical debate. In contrast, using language as a weapon to attack different views, including the government, does not require

much knowledge. Individuals only need to directly express subjective opinions about what they like, and attack the things they dislike. They do not need to explain why they think so, nor do they need to consider others' reactions. So, it becomes a much easier choice.

To add to this, rational-critical debate is not valued politically either. China lacks the political atmosphere that would facilitate rational-critical debate around political issues. It is even explicitly discouraged by the authorities through the threat of censorship. This lack of rational-critical debate is mirrored at governmental level around different political concerns and agendas. Individuals are not given a model, in terms of how to exchange contentious political opinions through reasoning (Liu, 2013: 139, 188-190, 192, 219). Instead, rational-critical debates, especially rational-critical debates around political issues at both governmental and grassroots levels, are not particularly valued by the public authority. This is because problematization through reasoning is seen as a threat, since it might lead to problematize Chinese political issues through offering rational explanations and evidence. For example, rather than voicing views that are critical of the Chinese political system, in a rational-critical debate, arguments might be made as to why the Chinese political system is not a good one, which might potentially influence other individuals whose political views are less formed. This type of problematization can inform and enlighten more individuals by critically presenting political opinions and encouraging individuals to think in-depth about the issues. Through rational-critical debates, individuals not only can express their views, but also engage in debate with others to rationally-critically unpack the issue, thereby enhancing their understanding about political concerns. In this process, different political opinions are debated, developing individuals' political knowledge and understanding, and leading to more considered thoughts about China's political situation. Some of these debates could be considered as promoting democratisation, which is

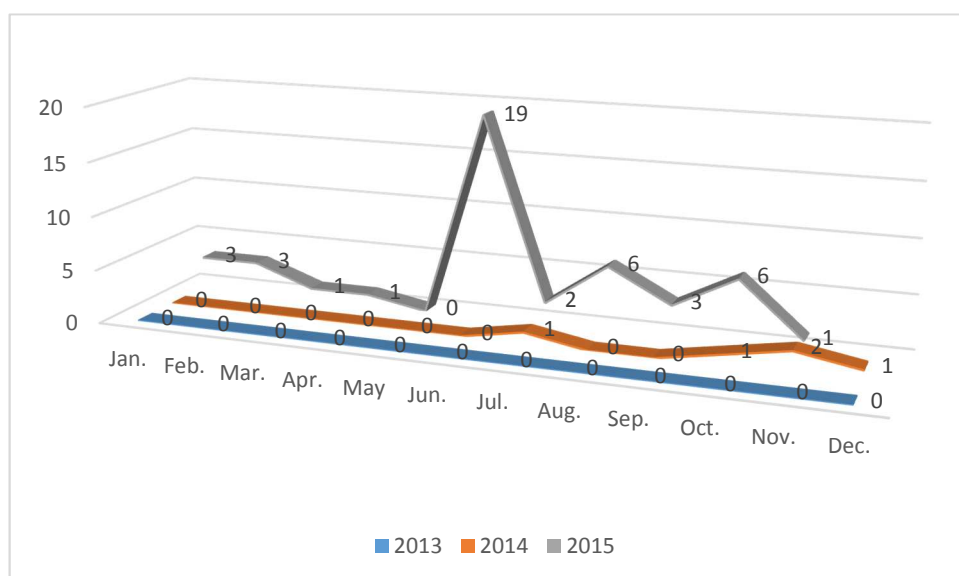
why rational-critical debates are more likely to be categorised as ‘sensitive information’ and due to this and its informative function, are more likely to be censored.

When compared with direct problematization through rational-critical debate, the use of linguistic violence does not necessarily involve expressions that would be considered explicitly sensitive; instead, as illustrated in Chapter 5, controversial views can be expressed indirectly. Language can be manipulated to express very challenging opinions without a single word that could be identified by the state monitoring system as ‘sensitive’. Linguistic violence has more chance of surviving in online debates, while at the same time, individuals’ anger and concerns can still be expressed. Therefore, using linguistic violence is seen as a safer option.

Meanwhile, in addressing linguistic violence, the public authority has to engage not only with the individual choice to use ‘bad’ language, but also, they would need to take into account both the social and political contexts that lie behind these linguistic choices, especially the political context of censorship that partially motivates the use of linguistic violence. So while respecting individual choices of language, at the same time they should try to provide individuals with more social and political resources to explain and encourage rational-critical debate, and stop categorising rational-critical debate as sensitive. This approach would ensure that individual choices of languages can be truly based on understanding and availability of both rational-critical debates and linguistic violence, rather than choosing one side because the other side is not socially and politically taught, valued or encouraged. Even after these actions, individuals may still choose to use linguistic violence; but nonetheless, the public authority could facilitate a better political and social environment for the online political communications by providing freer and wider choices through their engagement and response.

However, this research saw no evidence of this kind of engagement from the government. What is has observed is that from 2014, the Chinese government began to recognise the popular appeal of using linguistic violence in online debate. Evidence of this can be observed through the number of articles containing information about ‘use of language (用语)’ seen within the context of online public debate on the CAC website. As the government organ specifically designed to monitor and understand online communication, articles on its website directly reflect the issues that are drawing the attention of the authority. The following chart indicates this:

Chart 6.8 Numbers of Articles Containing Information about ‘Use of Language (用语)’ within the Context of Online Public Debate, on the Website of the Cyberspace Administration of China from January 2013 to November 2015



From this chart, it is possible to see that before July 2014 the website did not publish any articles regarding the use of language in online debate, which suggests that the public authority had not paid the issue any attention at that point. Ever since then, there has been an increase of articles indicating the

public authority's growing concern about online language use. June 2015 saw a dramatic rise and this with the publication of the 'People's Daily Survey Report of Vulgar Uses of Language on the Internet' on 2nd June 2015. It was the first national party media to publish reports specifically about violent language use in online debates in China. This was not the first report that the People's Daily had published, regarding the use of 'poor-taste' and 'vulgar' language in online debate. In January 2015, it had already published the '2014 Report of Linguistic Phenomena on the Internet', in which 'poor-taste' use of language got a small mention (People's Daily, 2015a: 9-11). But it was the 2015 survey report that really shone a light on this phenomenon. Following these two reports, more and more articles about linguistic violence online have been published on this website.

The reason why the People's Daily started to pay attention to online linguistic violence from 2015 has not been particularly put forward in their reports, but it is likely that it is because the phenomenon grew to the point where it could no longer be ignored. The 2015 report is a landmark in terms of the public authority's engagement with online linguistic violence in China, because although the government itself has not made any direct statements, the most central party media, as its mouthpiece, has repeatedly discussed the issue ever since. In other words, the public authority has noticed the increasing use of linguistic violence online and has started to engage with it, expressing their opinions about it through the party media. It is also after this piece that more and more articles have appeared in which linguistic violence is discussed.

Because the 2015 survey is such a landmark position, it is analysed below in order to understand the government's attitude towards linguistic violence.

The report has been divided into four sections:

1. Cohort shared understanding to clean online linguistic environment (凝聚共识需净化网络语言环境)

- 2.The general situation of online low-taste languages (网络低俗语言概况)
- 3.The phenomenon of use of online low-taste language (网络低俗语言的使用现象)
- 4.Civilisation and rationality should be the foundation of online discourses (文明理性应是网络言论根基)

Within these four sections, in section 2, the report illustrates terms like fuck (操), you mother (尼玛), and dick's (屌丝) of terms considered to be in poor-taste, towards its definition of online linguistic violence²³. The terms appearing in this section are swear words or humiliating terms are used to attack or negatively label other people. Section 3 then offers three categories that discusses the purposes of using linguistic violence. It argues abusive terms and swearing are used for 'give vent to sentiments (发泄情绪)', to 'maliciously hurt (others) (恶意中伤)', and to 'take poor-taste and vulgar as personal characteristics (粗鄙低俗为个性)'. The three categories portrayed online linguistic violence as an emotional and harmful personal choice. But none of the categories mention the political context of censorship that has made linguistic violence a safer and easier choice when expressing political opinions.

It becomes clear in these two sections that the party media, and the Chinese government it speaks for, regards online linguistic violence as individual net-users' personal choice in online political communication, which have a negative effect on communication and on other participants in that communication. This attitude also comes across in Sections 1 and 4 of the report, in which conclusive opinions are expressed about online linguistic violence and suggestions made with regards to reduce linguistic violence. One sentence, repeated twice in the report, once in the beginning when the

²³ Its examples of low-tastes terms have been used by this research as accordance to code, when it identifies online linguistic violence in the case studies, please see the appendix for the original documents and translations.

authors of the report introduce their central arguments; and once at the end, when the report sums up its arguments, seems to be the central message of the report. By analysing this sentence, it is possible to identify the central interests and attitudes, which the public authority holds:

(It is only through) Serious literacy education, shared understanding of cultural perception, common social norm and discipline, strict constraints, that becomes possible to establish the positive interaction between the reality and the virtual world, promote the healthy innovation of online language, let vulgar language gradually fade out, and let civilisation to gracefully come back and grow. (严肃的文本教育、公认的文化认知、共同的社会操守、严格的约束机制，唯有如此能实现现实与虚拟世界的正向联动，催生网络语言的健康革新，让低俗语言日渐淡出，让文明优美回归生长。)

To understand the message that is coded into the sentence and to understand whose interests and needs are reinforced through the discourse, SFL is used to deconstruct it in terms of actors and relations, and actions of those actors.

Chart 6.9 SFL Analysis of Parts in ‘People’s Daily Survey Report of Vulgar Use of Language on the Internet’

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <i>Actor</i> | It |
| <i>Goals</i> | Serious literacy education, shared understanding of cultural perception, common social norm and discipline, strict constraints, possible, positive interaction, healthy innovation of online language, vulgar language, civilisation |
| <i>Processes</i> | is, establish, promote, let, fade out, let, come back, grow |
| <i>Circumstances</i> | between reality and virtual world, |

From the above table, it can be seen that there are no actual actors in this sentence other than ‘it’, which does not refer to any particular bodies, but only

belongs to the phrase 'it is only through'. In contrast, there are 9 *goals* in this sentence, which all suggest that actions need to be taken, or things that to be acted on. Among those 9 goals, the report suggests that 'literacy education', 'cultural perception', 'social norm and discipline', and 'strict constraints' are needed, to reduce vulgar language, and to promote 'civilisation' and 'healthy language'. With the *actor* element missing but the 'goal' elements being established, it is unclear who is the person to 'educate', to establish 'perceptions', 'norms', 'disciplines' and 'constraints', and whose 'civilisation' and 'healthy language' will be established as a result. The selection of words and the arrangement of the text sets up standards for online communications and suggests ways to achieve them, but does not specifically explain how those standards will be established, and by whom.

By avoiding the mention of *actors* in the discourse, the report is trying to avoid involving the Chinese government in the discussion; instead, its suggestions are made out to be for the common good, rather than standards that are established by the government and imposed on the public. But in fact, the invisible actor in this text is the government; it is the government's 'perceptions', 'norms', 'disciplines' and 'constraints', and it is they who want 'civilisation, and healthy languages'. This is not surprising since the report is published by the People's Daily, the central party media in China, whose purpose is to defend the government interests; thus the opinions it generates reflect the needs of the government. Thus when it talks about education, culture, norms, discipline, and most crucially, constraints, it is in the context of a social and political system that is formalised and controlled by the Chinese government, rather than things that individuals can determine and aspire to.

The purpose of this report is thus not only to express the government's view of online linguistic violence, but also to minimise the controlling role of the government. The report suggests online linguistic violence needs to be

replaced by ‘civilisation and healthy language’, but rather than declaring this as the government’s wish, the report suggests it is in the interests of online debate, which makes it more appealing than directly talking about the government’s intentions. The issue behind linguistic violence, which is the conflict between a censored environment and individuals’ need to express their political concerns is not mentioned at all. Instead, it suggests that stricter constraints will reduce online linguistic violence. This demonstrates that the government defines the existence of online linguistic violence differently from the individual. The government does not see that a freer environment would offer individuals choices other than linguistic violence; instead, it proposes tighter control of online discourse to create a ‘healthy’ environment.

Overall, this report shows the government has acknowledged the existence of online linguistic violence as a part of communication online, and shows some willingness to discuss it with individuals, by expressing their thoughts. But it reinforces more of the government’s interests; as it puts forward government’s definitions and suggestions, but it does not truly consider what individuals might want and need from online linguistic violence, nor is the government likely to change its policy to respond to these needs.

This confirms the argument that has been made already, that the *corresponding political function* of the online public sphere is partly structured in the sense that the government has engaged with individuals to discuss the issue of linguistic violence; however, the discussion is not for the purposes of responding to public needs, but rather, to reinforce the public authority’s agenda. As a result, although it is possible to observe some communications between individuals and government, as individuals choose to express contentious views through linguistic violence, while government commenting on such choices; still the government has not been engaged fully with the online public sphere to address the concerns behind these language choices.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has discussed the *corresponding political function* of the online public sphere, in terms of the public authority's actions towards this sphere. Overall, public authority is still more powerful than the online public sphere, although the online public sphere is starting to have some powers to engage the public authority.

The Chinese public authority still applies censorship as a method of control, but control is by no means absolute; instead, it is up to the monitoring bodies and their case-by-case subjective judgments. On the other hand, the public authority has begun to acknowledge the debates taking place in the online public sphere and as a result, have begun to engage, all be it to a limited extent, in discussions about political issues and linguistic violence that emerge from the sphere. Engagement rather than censorship is certainly a positive sign, as it is evidence that the sphere has the power to engage the government in communicating with individuals about their concerns. But at the same time, this does not mean that there is a fully structured communication between individuals and government through the sphere, because the authority tends to use its engagement to underline its own interests, rather than seeking a reasonable solution with individuals towards addressing their concern. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the government will alter its behaviours or policies to serve individuals' interests.

Discussions and Conclusion

This thesis asks a central research question, which is how the online public sphere is structured in China. In addressing this question, public sphere theory has been used as the theoretical framework, including the three institutional criteria (*principally inclusive, problematization of unquestioned areas, and equality*) and two political functions (*expressional function and corresponding function*) stemmed from the theory as analytic lenses. Through examining the structure of the online public sphere, this research also aims to critically discuss online political communication in China.

This research firstly discussed the power relations between different participants in online political communications using two institutional criteria as analytic lenses, namely *principally inclusive* and *equality*, to look at questions of equality and inclusiveness in online communication. It then used *problematization of unquestioned areas* institutional criterion and *expressional political functions* as analytic lenses, to study how Chinese net-users problematize unquestioned areas in public affairs to express their concerns. This examination included discussions about both the content and language. It also discussed the government's actions towards net-users' expressions online, not only in terms of regulation and censorship, but also in terms of engagement and response, by using the analytic lens of *corresponding political function*.

After discussing the institutional criteria and political functions of the online public sphere, this research demonstrated that it is possible to observe both promises as well as limitations for the online public sphere in China. In other words, there are evidences showing that China's online public sphere can facilitate equal, inclusive, deliberative and critical political debates that allow Chinese net-users to express their opinions, and engage the Chinese public authority. This can be seen as the structured parts of the online public sphere that demonstrate what can be achieved in online political communication in

China. At the same time, the online public sphere is also limited by the unequal power relations between different types of users with different status in online political communications, in ways that status has not been disregarded in the debates, and certain opinions are given pre-determined significances. The other major limitation is that the government still holds the more power in online political communications: they are not only the regulators and monitors of these communications, but also increasingly seek to engage in them for the purposes of reinforcing and promoting their interests and needs. Those limitations are regarded in this research as the unstructured parts, because they demonstrate what cannot be achieved yet and what the restrictions are in online political communication. Both the structured and the unstructured parts co-exist, and only by understanding both can a holistic picture of the current online public sphere in China be drawn. Thus, what it is possible to say is that there is a semi-structured online public sphere in China, not in the sense that, it is half built, but to emphasize that it is a sphere in which both structured and unstructured elements co-exist and taking both aspects into account is indispensable in understanding online political communication in China.

This chapter will re-visit the key findings generated in the discussions about the three institutional criteria and the two political functions in the previous chapters, to critically summarise them and discuss the online public sphere in China as whole, to relate those empirical findings with existing academic studies of the online public sphere, and highlight the contributions.

The Theoretical Framework

The literature review chapter of this thesis critically reviewed both Habermas's interpretations of the public sphere theory and the key debates around these interpretations. It is these reviews that informed the research's theoretical framework and analytic lenses: discussions of the public sphere

can be expanded from the historical category of the bourgeois public sphere to public spheres in both democratic and non-democratic societies, as long as the application takes the social and political contexts of the society into account. The application follows Habermas's interpretation of the public sphere as a communicative space between the public and the public authority, namely the government of the country. Through this space, the public can express concerns while the authority listens and reacts (Habermas, 1989). Following this fundamental and critical interpretation, this research applies the three institutional criteria and two political functions of the public sphere originally spoken by Habermas in his work, and critically assessed and expanded in academic debates (Lande, 1988, Fraser, 1993, Thomassen, 2008, Calhoun, 1993), as analytic lenses. They involve critically reviewing the power relations between individuals, in terms of whether pre-existing social and political status has been disregarded altogether, thereby ensuring equal access to and expressions of express opinions, and those opinions being inclusively visible to all in the public domain. They include analysis of the interactions between the government and the public, namely what are the public concerns expressed through the sphere, and how the government react to those concerns. Taking the social and political context into account also means not treating one linguistic choice, such as a consensus-seeking rational-critical debate as the only legitimate one in political communications. But rather, contentious debates through a variety of language usage that reflect individuals' self-determined choices, and contributes to individuals' expressions of their political concerns, need to be examined.

Equality and Principally Inclusive Institutional Criteria

The first analytic lens of this research stemmed from the *equality* and *principally inclusive* institutional criteria, which focuses on the power relations between participants in the debates. To discuss the equality and

inclusiveness of the online public sphere in China, this research focused on the Sina Microblog, which is the most visited interactive site in China, and has a VIP system that categorising its users according to their pre-existing status, and allows social and political elites and celebrities to debate with status. After study, the research finds although pre-existing status is used to categorised people, still both VIP and non-VIP users have equal rights in terms of expressing and accessing opinions, of challenging contentious opinions and exchanging views. Their opinions are then inclusively visible and accessible in the public domain, as long as they are not censored by the government or website. This means, by having the Sina Microblog as a crucial institution of the online public sphere in China, a wide range of net-users can participate in political debates, rather than an arena which is only accessible to a selective group of people. The communications emerging through the sphere come from the net-users themselves and thus can inclusively reflect the views of those individuals, rather than only showing opinions from one group. The observations made here showing the equality and inclusiveness of the public sphere, in the sense that the sphere is 'open to all' (Habermas, 1989: 37), certainly with regards to individuals who have access to the Internet. There is the issue of the digital divide to consider as only half of the Chinese population are net-users, but for those who are able to use the Internet, the sphere is open to them equally, rather than selectively. The online public sphere in China has enabled different individuals to debate in the same arena, enabling them to communicate with people they would not speak to without the Internet; they can also directly challenge people they would not challenge without the online public sphere. The right to speak and to challenge are equally given to all, regardless of who they are.

However, although access may be equal, the pre-existing status of those net-users is not totally dis-regarded, because individuals using the Sina Microblog can choose to remain anonymous, but can also claim special status through

the VIP system. VIPs are individuals who, through belonging to social and political elites, already have more social and political capital and use their status to generate more influence and impact in political communications. By introducing the VIP system, Sina offers VIP users more power, not to necessarily dominate the debate, but to influence the debate. Because the public opinions generated on Sina Microblog still come from individual net-users who can post their thoughts through blogging, commenting and retweeting on an equal basis. But by reinforcing statuses rather than disregarding them, Sina users are acknowledged of a difference in status between those who are regarded as VIPs and those who are not. The VIP users are not given any rights to silence or represent public opinion; but they have been constructed with the power to influence. As a result, VIP users' opinions are given pre-determined significance, not because of the content of those opinions, but because of their pre-existing status. With powers being unequally constructed, the inclusiveness of the online public sphere is also impacted.

Based on these findings, this research suggests that while there are structured parts of the *equality* and *principally inclusive* institutional criteria that enable Chinese net-users to equally engage, express and challenge, the public sphere only partially meets the criteria because the acknowledgement of pre-existing status still offers some users more power than others.

By particularly discussing the power relations between different participants of the online debates in China, which is a less studied area in the previous academic discussions, this research widened up the knowledge of the dynamics of the online political communications in China. It shows that although the power relations and struggle between the public and the government is still a central focus, studies around power relations between different net-users are also important and enabled us to know more about the communications take place online in China. By presenting findings in this

regards, this research contributes to the current debates of China's online political communications.

Problematization of Unquestioned Areas Institutional Criterion and Expressional Political Function

The second analytic lens stemmed from the *problematization of unquestioned areas* and the *expressional political function*, which focuses on through what ways and how Chinese net-users problematize the Chinese government to express their concerns. Habermas argues that the structure of the *problematization of unquestioned areas* institutional criterion means individuals use reason to define (or redefine) meanings of public concern, so that those meanings are no longer 'components' of the public authority's representation, but become areas that private people can 'determine its meaning on their own' (Habermas, 1989: 36). The *expressional political function* is built upon this criterion, allowing individuals to deliberatively and equally express their self-determined concerns that reflect their true needs. The findings in this research show that in the online public sphere in China, net-users are debating about the role of the Chinese public authority as well as their decisions and behaviours. The way unquestioned areas are problematized and how concerns are expressed varies according to the subject of debate.

When discussing a specific domestic policy, individuals are more likely to directly use the 'government' and 'party' in their expressions, and then associating the terms with particular issues and with negative indications, such as corruption, stupid or disrespect public opinions. The explicit points of view, and challenges towards the government are thus expressed. They are also more likely to problematize local government's decisions and actions with regards to particular domestic policies, accusing them of corruption and/or failing to address public concerns in the policy-making process. While

the national government's decisions and policy-making are less likely to be portrayed negatively and less likely to be problematized; the political system that allows policies to be passed without democratic process is also less likely to be challenged either. On the other hand, individuals are more likely to debate, question and challenge the national government's roles in dealing with international issues. Chinese net-users communicate their concerns if they consider that the national government is failing to serve China's national interests effectively. In this case, both the political system in China, and the government's behaviours in dealing with the international issue, are likely to be problematized.

Under these circumstances, what Chinese net-users have achieved by using the Internet as an online debating platform is to define the meaning of government policy and behaviours in their own terms rather than those of the government, and to express their concerns towards these policies and behaviours. This fits with how Habermas has described the public sphere, and thus proves the online public sphere in China can be seen as structured upon *problematization of unquestioned areas* institutional criterion, and can deliver *expressional political function*. These findings also concur with Yang's view of the public sphere in China as enabling the 'articulation of social problems and has shown some potential to play a supervisory role in Chinese politics' (Yang, 2003b: 474). The findings also resonate with Zheng and Wu's description of the online public sphere in China as 'a new battlefield where the state and social groups fight for power and interest' (Zheng and Wu, 2006: 553). However, this research's findings are also more specific: showing the online public sphere in China is not only used for one type of problematization with regards to one type of issue. Rather, Chinese net-users self-determine their opinions and expressions with regards to different political issues and target different levels of governments in different ways, questioning and challenging them to reflect their concerns.

In terms of directly problematizing the political system in China, this research found such expressions do exist in the online political communication in China, but to a lesser extent when compared to the extent to which a particular policy or behaviour might be challenged. The findings also suggest that when individuals do problematize the political system in China, they are less likely to refer directly to the 'government' or the 'party', and more likely to express their opinions through ironic metaphors that involve linguistic violence. Using linguistic violence, as Kádár et al (2013) and Meng (2011) have argued the use of linguistic violence in online debates not only shows Chinese net-users' creativity in resisting government censorship, but also allows challenging opinions to remain in the public domain rather than being censored. This research concurs with their argument and has provided examples of individuals manipulating language in order to problematize the political system. Net-users are able to organise sentences in linguistically violent ways to attack the government, especially through using humiliating metaphors when referring to the authorities. They also find ways of using the double meanings of a particular word, such as 鸡的屁 (ji de pi=GDP), to ridicule government policy. Regardless of how language is used, individuals are able to redefine the meaning of the political system in China, rather than using the definitions provided by the government. By reading linguistically violent expressions, it is possible to understand what individuals think about the Chinese political system, their frustrations and their concerns, and their intentions to express these concerns. This once again showing the structure of the online public sphere in China.

With regards to language use in the online public sphere, this research has shown that rational-critical debates are not the only way to problematize unquestioned areas and express political concerns. Linguistic violence can be an effective vehicle for the expression of political concerns. In this respect, this thesis does not agree with Li (2006)'s criticism that the tendency towards

‘sensationalism’ limits the structure of online public sphere in China. Although Chinese net-users use linguistic violence in expressing their emotions, those expressions nonetheless strongly communicate their dislike and disapproval in self-determined and critical ways. Thus, although there is more emotion than rationality in linguistic violence, the critical reflections, problematization and the expression of political views are not affected by language choice. This type of language use does serve a function in the structure of the *problematization of unquestioned areas* and *expressional political function* in the online public sphere, and also enables individuals to express themselves rather than remaining silent. Thus, more attention should be paid to the value of linguistic violence as a linguistic choice in the online public sphere.

By studying not only the contents, but also the languages used in the online public sphere, this research again contributes to the current academic debates in the field. It contributes to a less answered question in terms of how Chinese net-users criticising the Chinese government, by examining the linguistic element of the online public sphere. It shows by analysing how languages are used, the strategies and methods Chinese net-users adopt to question the Chinese government and express their concerns can be further understand.

Corresponding Political Function

The third analytic lens stemmed from the *corresponding political function* of the online public sphere in China, which focuses on the government’s actions/reaction towards the online public sphere. This research has argued that the regulations and censorship at national level and on individual websites form the context, within which the government’s actions towards online political communications in China have to be discussed. These written regulations define the government’s control and censorship of online political communications, and individual websites loyally follow the government’s

line in establishing their own approach to monitoring and censorship. Through these regulations, the needs and interests of the government, namely the maintenance of control over online information and communications, are reinforced. It is also significant that regulations are brief and their wording ambiguous, so that while individuals are made aware of the existence of control and censorship, the power to make specific judgements on what should be censored, how to censor and when to censor is given only to the government and the website administrators. Thus, the government and website administrators are empowered, while the net-users are not: they find themselves debating in an environment they know is subject to censorship, but hold uncertainty towards the enforcement of censorship.

At the same time, this context also means that censorship is not enforced in every instance but rather, on a case-by-case basis, depending on the regulatory body's subjective judgement: it may happen or may not. In this context, the government is still the actor who has the power to define and to enforce, with some space allowed in which challenging communications can survive censorship.

Within this context, this research then looked into the government's engagement with the issues discussed in the online public sphere, and their response to the use of linguistic violence in political communications. In previous academic studies, the government's engagements and response are touched a lot less, but this research regarded them as equally important in understanding online political communication in China. By investigating the government's engagement with online political communication, this research has generated new perspectives on the interaction between individuals and the government.

The analysis of the debates that took place around the Kunming oil-refinery showed on the one hand, the Chinese government and website administrators monitored and censored online public debates that challenged the

government's decision; on the other hand, the Chinese government did engage in communicating about the issue. Those engagements are firstly shown as Chinese government has recognised the existence and importance of the online public sphere in China: it is an acknowledgement of the fact that Chinese net-users are using the online public sphere as a key arena to express their political opinions and concerns, and that the government is aware of those concerns. The Chinese government's response in using multiple channels through which to communicate with individuals the reasons behind their decision about the oil refinery, indicates that it is taking notice of concerns raised in the online public sphere. One local government officer even used the Sina Microblog as a platform to communicate with net-users, helping to establish a more open, equal and inclusive conversation. This kind of engagement enables the online public sphere to not only function as a platform for individuals to express themselves, but also as a space where the government can be made aware of individuals' questions and concerns and can engage with them.

However, this research also found that rather than fully engaging with individuals in a conversation to reach a reasonable solution that addresses the concern, the Chinese government treats communication channels to reinforce and promote their pre-existing interests, and to persuade individuals to accept their decisions. As a result, while the online public sphere in China has facilitated discussions about public concerns that have included the public authority, it has not been powerful enough to make the government open up any conversation that involves genuinely seeking the opinions of individuals, and the government is unlikely to change their decisions to respond to public needs. Thus, this research argues that while the government has engaged to some extent, it has yet to fully respond to the needs.

Similarly, in terms of online linguistic violence, the government has recognised the increasingly popular use of it in online political

communication, to the extent that through the party media, it has published articles specifically to comment on online linguistic violence and make suggestions about how to reduce it. These reports can be seen as the government engaging with an issue raised in the online public sphere. This attempt to engage rather than just imposing censorship, is a positive sign. But in engaging with the issue, the government has not shifted from its position of defining and reinforcing its own interests and agenda, to address the public's concerns that might lie behind the choice to use linguistic violence. In this sense, the government is simply using the interaction to promote and persuade rather than to open up to opinions from individuals and truly respond to public concerns.

The discussions of the engagements and responses from the government add new perspectives to the current academic debates, which is another contribution this research makes. Such discussions strengthened the understanding of the government's roles in the online political communications, and invite further research focus to go beyond the traditional focus of censorship and control.

To sum up, the Chinese online public sphere's role as a communicative space for different participants, and between them and public authority is taking shape. Different opinions around different political issues are increasingly debated in this sphere, with different linguistic choices. In this sphere, the public authority not only monitors and censors, but has also started to show awareness and engagement. The sphere can be seen as being semi-structured: it is structured in the sense that it can be seen as a powerful narrative organ for individuals to express self-determined opinions with some level of government engagement; it is also unstructured side because it cannot be viewed as a fully established organ with the power to put real pressure on the public authority or achieve any genuine and sustained changes at policy level.

Reflections of the Research

This research is based on a study of online political communications in China between 2012 and 2015. The findings have described the structure of the online public sphere in contemporary China, but it cannot argue things are totally settled and will not be changed in the future. It is a phenomenon that is inevitably subject to change. The power struggle between individuals and the government over this sphere, this research argues, will continue; individuals will continue to use the semi-structured online public sphere critically to express their opinions, and the government will continue to react to those expressions either through censorship or engagement. Thus, the online public sphere in China as described here cannot be regarded as definitive, but rather a description of it in its current stage of development. The theoretical framework offered by this research can and will be applied to continue this study: to discuss new issues regarding power relations between participants in online political communications; to focus on new concerns raised in the sphere, and the languages used by individuals to express such concerns; and to observe the government's reactions to the sphere. Only by doing so can academic debates be kept up to date with the development of the online public sphere in China.

In terms of the limitations of this research, its investigation of China's semi-structured online public sphere is based on three of the most crucial and major contentious public debates in China's online political communications. These three debates are significant but they are not the only contentious issues to be debated in China's online public sphere. Understanding about China's semi-structured online public sphere could be expanded and enhanced by examining other contentious debates in this sphere. For example, the online public sphere is increasingly used by feminist groups to discuss mainstream patriarchy and gender inequalities. Such debates could be analysed through

the framework used in this research to assess the power relations between female and male users in China's online public sphere. These debates could also be examined to ascertain the level to which individuals can problematize the public authority's definition of gender roles, to analyse the language used to problematize those gender roles and to see how the public authority engages with such concerns.

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Appendix