



Blekinge Institute of Technology
School of Computing
Department of Technology and Aesthetics

WEIBO'S ROLE IN SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN CHINA

Shajin Chen

2014
BACHELOR THESIS
B.S. in Digital Culture

Supervisor:
Maria Engberg

Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION	2
2. INTERNET AND MICROBLOGGING IN CHINA	5
2.1 INTERNET, MEDIA AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPE IN CHINA: AN OVERVIEW	5
2.2 MICROBLOGGING AND CHINESE WEIBO	7
2.3 SINA WEIBO: THE KING OF MICROBLOGGING IN CHINA	8
3. DOMINANT FEATURES OF WEIBO IN SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL SPHERE	10
3.1 INFORMATION DIFFUSION	11
3.2 OPINION LEADERS AND VERIFIED IDENTITY	12
3.3 PLATFORM FOR FREE SPEECH, COLLECTIVE VOICE AND EXPOSURE	14
3.4 PARTICIPATION OF MASS MEDIA AND GOVERNMENT	15
4. CASE STUDIES	18
4.1 CASE STUDY ONE: THE GUO MEIMEI INCIDENT	19
4.2 CASE STUDY TWO: THE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ON WEIBO IN THE CHINESE PEOPLE'S POLITICAL CONSULTATIVE CONFERENCE (CPPCC) AND THE NATIONAL PEOPLE'S CONGRESS (NPC)	28
5. DISCUSSIONS.....	37
WORKS CITED.....	42

1. Introduction

Social media has already proven to be a powerful media outlet in China, but the development of microblogging has opened a new chapter in power relations in China and significantly expanded the reach and potency of social media channels (Tong and Lei, 2013). Weibo, the Chinese word for microblogging, is considered to be a growing power of the Chinese Internet and has been enthusiastically depicted by Western media as a new “free speech platform” (Fu, Chan & Chua, 2013, 42). This thesis analyzes some of the social changes and implications fostered by the use of weibo, as a new phenomenon in Chinese society, by examining its role in shaping public opinion and political sphere in China.

This thesis will be divided into three main sections with a series of subsections. The first section will introduce the history of Chinese Internet, political landscape, and the development of microblogging in China. In the second section, the dominant features of weibo in shaping public sphere will be analyzed to illustrate how these significant features affect weibo’s role in shaping public opinion and political participation. In the third section, I will conduct two case studies, one of them is based on Sina Weibo, “the king of microblogging platforms in China” (Zhang & Negro, 2013, 200), to demonstrate how Sina Weibo has played a crucial role in framing collective voice and shaping public opinion. The second case study is based on weibo in general, to show weibo enables political participation of ordinary citizens and the formation of a new political sphere in China. In the final part of the thesis, I will discuss the limitations and challenges, as well as the sociopolitical implications of weibo.

Microblogging has certainly changed the ways in which the Chinese people connect and communicate today, but it is also rooted in their social and cultural values (Zhang & Negro, 2013). Weibo has become the most popular public communication channel where people could reveal corruption, local conflicts, controversies, and most recently insights and first-hand reports from different emergency such as the Ya'an earthquake. According to Guoming Yu (2011), discussions about more than 25 % of the most important public events in 2010 began on weibo and almost all public events were discussed on microblogs. The breadth and nature of public debate in China has drastically been changed by the use of social media (BBC News, 2012), and weibo is an important component in this process of change due to its size, popularity and influence. This situation gives rise to many questions: How weibo unleashed such momentum? What role does it play in shaping public opinion and political sphere in China? What are the sociopolitical implications and limitations of the weibo phenomenon?

As scholars Ines Mergel and Bill Greeves indicate, the fundamental consequence of all social media is a cultural shift and, the rise of social media has driven forward a new information paradigm. Further, new forms of collaborative engagement in the public sector that have dramatically affected the ways in which governments communicate and build relationships with citizens (Mergel & Greeves, 2013, 128). Hans Ulrich Buhl also states that, social media provide the possibilities of democratic decision-making process in authoritarian states (Buhl, 2011, 196). Further, microblogging has become a major avenue for challenging authority, especially in China's single-party political landscape. Civilian efforts could balance the state power and promote the democratization process in China (Lu & Qiu, 2013; Lin, 2010). In addition, Yanqi Tong and Shaohua Lei have argued that the primary role of China's micro-blogsphere is to provide a liberal-leaning space for counter-

hegemony and public engagement while the second role is to provide space to generate public opinion (Tong & Lei, 2013, 295). As Jia Lu and Yunxi Qiu emphasize, microblogging is having a significant impact on the formation of civil society and the public sphere in contemporary China (Lu & Qiu, 2013).

Given the potential of the Internet to facilitate a civic culture in the single party state, the use of weibo and its effects on citizens' political attitudes and behaviors are of great concern. In recent studies, many scholars and researchers have successfully proven the symbolic power of microblogs in framing political perceptions, but they have neglected the possibilities for official political participations on social media. As Lu and Qiu (2013) emphasize, microblogs not only help the underprivileged to express opinions but also enhance public political participation. Besides, few studies have focused on the limitation and challenges of weibo in shaping public opinion and political participation. It is therefore particularly pertinent to analyze the social changes, as well as the challenges that weibo phenomenon has brought to China. It is important to be aware of that weibo should not be viewed as a panacea, but instead, it has the potential to act as a catalyst for social change (Lu & Qiu, 2013). However, with the introduction of microblog in China, dramatic changes have happened within the society and Chinese new media mechanisms are being formed.

2. Internet and Microblogging in China

This section is divided into three subsections. First, a brief history of Chinese Internet, media and political landscape is provided, in order to understand the background of why microblogging has become a popular phenomenon within such a short time and taking the dominant media position in contemporary China based on those factors. Further, this section will also discuss the remarkable characteristics of microblogging and the rapid development of Chinese weibo, how it has led the Chinese society into a “weibo era”. In the third subsection, the leading weibo platform in China – Sina Weibo will be introduced as a symbolic weibo platform with its basic functions and some of its special features such as verified identity system.

2.1 Internet, media and political landscape in China: an overview

In the last three decades, China has been through enormous changes, especially in regard to its rapid economic growth. Supported by increasingly comprehensive coverage of Internet in the country, remarkable changes in ways of communication and new formation for public opinion have followed. According to CNNIC-China Internet Network Information Centre in 2013, as of the end of 2013, there were more than 600 million Chinese Internet users, while mobile Internet netizens were over 500 million people, placing the Internet penetration rate to over 45%. Today, Chinese people have more diversified channels to obtain information, especially regarding public affairs that were less accessible in the past and because the traditional media outlets still remain under CCP (Chinese Communist Party) control (Lin, 2010 and Xiao, 2011). Similarly, mass media has lost its credibility due

to tight control from the Chinese government and media's inability to address the concern and issues of the common people (Lu & Qiu, 2013). As Qiang Xiao notes, before the Internet opportunities for unconstrained public self-expression and access to uncensored information were extremely limited (Xiao, 2011). The openness of Internet has become a public sphere in which various criticisms against the government are voiced on a daily basis (Tong & Lei, 2012). Johan Lagerkvist also notes that Chinese society norms have changed in the Internet era and Chinese Internet users start to engage with the sensitive political topic in social media (Lagerkvist, 2010). Wilfred Y. Wang underlines that the Internet has become integrated into Chinese people's everyday life" (Wang, 2012).

However, even after the Internet was introduced in China in 1987, the government has been able to censor an extensive amount of information before it reaches the public (Lin, 2010). As Zixue Tai (2006) argues, every stage of Chinese Internet development has implications in relation to not only technological progress but also the government's approach towards public participation on the Internet. Since 2009, the influence of social media has expanded with the development of weibo because the possibility for social change it has brought to the Chinese society. Within a short time of its inception, weibo has quickly developed into a "we-media"¹ platform and a major channel for the expression of public opinion (People's Daily Online, 2011). Weibo has also become a platform for civic engagement of social and political issues. As Xiao Qiang (2011) said, weibo made it easier for individuals to speak out, and harder for censors to pinpoint troublemakers, "weibo is a social media

¹ We-media is a concept introduced by Dan Gillmor in his 2004 book "We the Media," which is about how the proliferation of grassroots Internet journalist (bloggers) has changed the way news is handled. Nowadays, we-media or self-media is commonly referred to the phenomenon of grassroots journalist via social media.

platform particularly effective at aggregating micro-opinions into a collective voice,” (AFP, September 8, 2011). Further, Keith B. Richburg wrote in the Washington Post, “In a country where most media are controlled by the state, information is heavily censored and free-flowing opinions are sharply constricted, Chinese have turned to microblogging to openly exchange unfettered news and views”. Weibo “seems to be one step ahead of China’s notoriously efficient censors, with a dozen microblogging sites... and a million posts every hour.” (Keith B. Richburg, Washington Post, March 27, 2011).

2.2 Microblogging and Chinese weibo

Microblog as an example of Web2.0 technology has the special communication characteristic of “anytime, anywhere, anyone and anything”. Millions of netizens use this social media platform to revel in satire, funny memes, new buzzwords, stalking celebrities, and microblogging on everyday life. The most popular microblogging site in the world – Twitter – was launched in 2006 in the United States. Twitter with its instant information dissemination model was booming in the United States and soon expanded to the world. More importantly, microblogging has the function of entertainment and the possibilities in participating political issues. Twitter has played a pivotal role in many important events such as the direct information of Michael Jackson’s death, the Obama campaign and the Iranian presidential election. In China, Fanfou launched the first microblog platform in 2007. But the most recognized and largest microblog platform was launched by Sina Corporation in late 2009. Sina Weibo was introduced as a social network site with fast information sharing and entertainment oriented platform. Millions of young people followed, until October 2010, Sina Weibo has reached over 50 millions

users less than one year after its inception (Sina Weibo, 2010). After Sina launched its weibo platform, Tencent, Netease and Sohu have also launched their own weibo platforms, which Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo are the mainstream microblogging platforms in China (Sullivan, 2012). Until 2012, weibo users accounted for 88.81% of the total Internet users in China (CNNIC, 2013). During the time between 2009-2011 when China experienced a significant boom in microblogging, Chinese society entered a period of rapid development of microblogging.

2.3 Sina Weibo: the king of microblogging in China

Sina Weibo (<http://weibo.com>) is the king of microblogging in China, because it is the leading microblogging platform with the highest number of weibo users, also because it is one of the most influential and popular social network sites in China (alexa.com, 2014). Sina Corporation built its microblog services by moving its most popular Sina bloggers — movie stars, real estate tycoons, athletes and writers — onto their microblog platform at beginning of Sina Weibo. Sina Weibo sites use a format similar to its American counterpart Twitter, which remains blocked in China since 2009 (BBC News, 2012). But the key difference is that Sina Weibo is used almost exclusively by Chinese speakers (alexa.com, 2014). Similar to Twitter, weibo allows users to post short text message with the limit of 140 characters, supporting searching, trend (topic with # symbol) and conversation (message with @ symbol). It is worth mentioning that a post of Chinese weibo of 140 characters conveys more information than in English (Wang, 2012, 376). Like Ai Weiwei, a famous Chinese artist notes, “In the Chinese language, 140 characters is a novella” (qtd in Sullivan, 2012, 775). As the image shows below, one can see that a 140

characters Chinese twitter conveys almost three times more information than in English (e.g. see image 1).



Image 1. Source: screenshot, Micheal Anti, *Tedtalks*, June 2012

The use of Sina Weibo reflects trends in the broader Chinese Internet, which is dominated by entertainment (qtd in Sullivan, 2012). The most popular daily trends on Sina Weibo are generally entertainments news, gossip, commercial information and sports. Some weibo users use their real identity, while others choose not to register their real name. Either way, they engage in discussions and debate on current events, social injustice, inequalities, and economic development, any topic one can think of. Further, Sina Weibo encourages real identity users through their “identity verification” system, either as an individual or an organization. Normally, celebrities or any one with social reputation or status, enterprises and companies would apply for identity verification. Once the identity is verified, a symbol of ‘V’ (individuals are with golden V and organizations are with blue V) and the real identity is displayed on the profile (Huang & Sun, 2014). According to Sina data, the verified identify users were already more than half of the total Sina Weibo users in

the end of 2012. However, the rapid development of weibo has led the Chinese public communication entered a “weibo era”.

3. Dominant features of weibo in shaping public opinion and political sphere

To analyze the role of weibo in shaping public opinion and political sphere, one has to explore the dominant features of weibo in order to understand how these features facilitate weibo in shaping public sphere. In this section, four dominant features of weibo will be illustrated, they are: information diffusion, opinion leaders and verified identity, platform for free speech, collective voice and exposure, the participation of mass media and government. These significant features are the fundamental and key components that facilitate weibo in shaping public sphere. In most cases, these features are closely connected and incorporated with one another to archive impact as a whole, which some of these features will be demonstrated in the case studies section. As Lu and Qiu (2013) have noted that the important features of weibo theoretically reflect two major social processes in China today: modernization and globalization. Modernization process is transformed China from a premodern society into a genuine modern society. Globalization process has brought to china the postmodern practices of developed societies. These processes may support the development of civil society and the public sphere.

3.1 Information diffusion

Differing from the traditional transmission model of one-to-many, microblogging takes the model of viral dissemination, that is, one-to-many-to-many. Thus, messages can be transmitted from one point to a vast number of points in a very short time (Public Opinion Research Lab of Shanghai Jiao Tong University 2011a, 372). It is a revolution how information is consumed, people could share what they observe in their surroundings and express their opinion about variety of topics (Lu & Qiu, 2013). Weibo's significance in information diffusion was first demonstrated by a college student who "live microblogged" the Danqu mudslide in 2010 through Sina Weibo application on his mobile. In China, this case could be considered as a typical example of we-media that weibo era has brought to the information age. While traditional media were unable to use in urgent circumstances, we-media and mobile Internet through weibo application play a critical role for first hand information dissemination. "In emergency situations, microblogs have not only served as a significant tool for information dissemination, but also affected the formation and changing of public opinion," said Meng Lingjun, a lecturer at the Central China Normal University (Xinhuonet.com, July 24, 2011). As Michael Anti argues, weibo has quickly become a media itself or "the media" (Ref. Anti, June 2012). In the time of we-media, grassroots journalism is widely propagated (Gillmor, 2004), and weibo creates the possibility for anyone can be a medium and to produce media.

As important, the widespread of mobile Internet also enriches the information diffusion on weibo. The comprehensive coverage of mobile Internet in China provides much lower threshold for grassroots citizens to participate on weibo, a significant online platform where one can conveniently and inexpensively engage

with public online issue beyond geographical boundaries (Huang and Sun, 2014). According to Sina, their mobile weibo users has exceeded PC users in the end of 2011 and will continue to increase (Sina, 2012); DCCI (Data Center of China Internet) has shown that on September 2012, the number of weibo users has reached to 327 million, 89.35% of which access weibo site on smartphones. As Qiu (2009) states “an increasingly large proportion of netizens are accessing the Internet solely on their mobile phones, reducing the inequalities in access that characterized the earlier phase of Internet adoption” (qtd in Sullivan, 2012, 774).

3.2 Opinion leaders and verified identity

A study in 2009 by the Chinese Academy of social sciences on the Internet’s impact on public opinion identified netizens as a “new opinion class” (qtd in Xiao, 2011, 58). The role of weibo in shaping public opinion and the social influence it caused cannot be framed without the central opinion force on weibo — opinion leaders. Opinion leaders on microblogs represent voices of various social groups, they are the social elites that generally lead the discussion of public affairs and grassroots users followed (Lu & Qiu, 2013). To some extent, public attention created by civic engagement of any specific public affair on weibo is generally associated with the mass participation of netizens and great amount of related weibo posts and reposts. Many weibo public events were strongly affected by the engagement of opinion leaders. Similarly, Lu and Qiu (2013) indicate that while microblog has weakened the social authorities, it has also produced new authorities such as opinion leaders that could expand their influence and play a critical role in online public opinion events.

Supported by the real name verification system, weibo has enhanced the role of opinion leaders who are crucial in pushing public opinion on certain incidents (Tong and Lei, 2012). A verified user generally has high social status and a good reputation, and with a “V” appears on their weibo profile, it increases their chance of being followed and made them become opinion leaders. As Lu and Qiu suggest that opinion leaders are composed of social and political elite (Lu & Qiu, 2013), which normally have thousands to millions of followers on weibo. This unique service of verification improves the reliability of user’s identity and facilitating the formation of online connections (qtd in Huang & Sun, 2014). Likewise, identity verification on weibo affirms authenticity and functions as a sign of trustworthiness, (Tong & Lei, 2012; Huang & Sun, 2013). More importantly, the more followers one has the more influence one is. As Kai-Fu Lee, the founder and CEO of Innovation Works, that has written on his book “*Micro-blog: Changing the World*” (2011, 26):

In micro-blog era, if you have 100 followers, just like you made a tabloid fashion, you can enjoy to be respected, to be read for fun in circle of friends; If you have 1,000 followers, just like you made a poster; if there are 10,000 followers, just like you have founded a magazine; If you have 100,000 followers, just like you have founded a local newspaper; with 1,000,000 followers, your voice will be like on the national newspaper headlines that will make influence; if you have 10 million followers, you will just like a television announcer that can easily let people across the country to hear your own voice (Author’s translation).

For instance, Kai-Fu Lee, who has 50.33 million followers on his Sina Weibo, as of April 2014; Chen Yao, another famous opinion leader, an actress who

has 66.46 millions followers on her Sina Weibo in April 2014. They are definitely two prominent opinion leaders on Sina Weibo. They have been involved in the discussion of many public events and the followers have been often numerous reposting their weibo posts. As Tong and Lei (2012) states, opinion leaders' perspectives are likely to influence the followers that would impact the direction of certain events. Many of opinion leaders have even registered multiple accounts on different weibo platforms "in order to achieve maximum influence" (Tong & Lei, 2012, 298).

3.3 Platform for free speech, collective voice and exposure

Because the rapid information dissemination and the large number of users, weibo has become a major platform for public opinion and online discourse in China. In recent years, the rise of social networking sites has given netizens an unprecedented capacity for communication and for voicing their opinion (Xiao, 2011 & Lin, 2010), thus social media may be considered as the precursor of free speech for Chinese citizens. Especially since all the other foreign channels of free expression are blocked in China for instance Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Weibo has therefore become the most prominent place for free speech in China (Richburg, 2011). Further, "microblogs allow various strains of social dissent to converge online, establishing connections and alliances between different social groups" (Lu & Qiu, 2013, 309). In the meantime, microblogging offers a universal platform to mobilize collective voice through the commonly opinion expression between different social groups (Lu & Qiu, 2013).

In addition, one of the reasons for weibo's success in shaping public opinion could be that many influential incidents were first exposed through weibo platforms. For example, the famous Wenzhou serious train accident in 2011, the

affair of a bureau director in Liyang, the Guo Meimei incident and a badly photo-shopped picture of Huili County government officials. The Guo Meimei incident in 2011 was well known as a scandal of Red Cross Society of China, and there were more than 640,000 microblog posts concerning the Guo Meimei incident alone (People's Daily Online, 2011). The Guo Meimei incident will be analyzed in detail as the first case study in later section. It is worth mentioning the Wenzhou train accident was the first incident that formats the power of weibo in shaping public opinion among the Chinese Internet. According to Michael Anti, a famous Chinese journalists and political blogger, public discussion on weibo regarding to this incident has received 10 millions related microblog-posts in the first five days, which had never happened in Chinese social media history (Ref. Anti, June 2012).

3.4 Participation of mass media and government

The formation of the weibo phenomenon is inseparable from the participation of mass media and government. They have tried hard to develop a microblog presence in order to face microblogging's challenges (Lu & Qiu, 2013). In term of weibo's ability to upload pictures and video clips, the real-time live broadcasting function has surpassed other traditional media such as TV (Tong & Lei, 2012). With the example of the Danqu mudslide has shown above, all the news media adopted the pictures taken by the collogue student on his weibo account. Similarly, the huge fire accident in Shanghai Jiaozhou road that happened in November 2010, there were several hundred photos of the fire accident posted on different weibo platforms within an hour, which was far exceeding the speed of mass media (Tong & Lei, 2012). Aware of the unique feature in information dissemination of weibo and its valuable news sources for mass media, different Chinese media immediately

participate in weibo and become faithful users (Tong and Lei, 2012; Lu & Qiu, 2013). According to data, as of the end of 2010, there were 1,185 mainstream media institutes opened official accounts on Sina Weibo, comprising 233 radio stations, 541 magazines, 290 newspapers, and 121 television stations (Public Opinion Research Lab of Shanghai Jiao Tong University 2011a). From Sina data, Sina Weibo has already verified 5,886 media journalists and professionals on their weibo platform by the end of 2010 (Sina Corporation, White Paper on Year One of China's Microblog Market, 2010).

Similarly, the development of weibo also attracted the Chinese government. With the latest data in the Annual Report of Sina Government Weibo (2013), until the end of 2013, there was 100, 151 government weibo accounts been verified on Sina Weibo. These government accounts have included all the regional/local government at different administrative levels in China, of which 66,830 official government agencies and 33,321 government officers, with a growth of 40,000 compared to 2012, an increase of over 60%. According to Sina, with its maintained high growth rate, the government weibo accounts are expected to increase more than 50% to the end of 2014. In addition, it is worth mentioning that the Supreme People's Court of China launched its official account on Sina Weibo on 21th November 2013, the first national weibo in China. This weibo account had obtained 289, 854 followers on December 14, only 24 days after they launched the account (Annual Report of Sina Government Weibo, December 27, 2013).

This information above might seem amazing according to the traditional Chinese political landscape. What could be the main reasons? First of all, the Chinese Public Opinion and Social Crisis Management Report (2012) has shown that in 2011, incidents exposure on new media platforms was continually increased and large amount of them were first exposure on weibo. Many weibo exposure

incidents quickly draw the public attention and being widely discussed. For example Lei Zhengfu sex scandal (2012)² and scandal of Shanghai judges hire prostitutes (2013)³ were first exposed via Sina Weibo; Bo Xilai's corruption trial (2013)⁴ went "lived-microblogging" on weibo four days in a row and it has received 569, 599 netizens followed the topic of "#Bo Xilai trial#" on Sina Weibo (People.cn, August 29, 2013). With public pressure that created by weibo discourses, relevant governmental agencies were eventually forced to respond to the issues. Interestingly, in many cases, the response channel was most chosen by quickly launched weibo accounts with verified identity. Second of all, perhaps it is hard to deny that at the earlier time of weibo, government participated in weibo based on a passive position. But after weibo became a mainstream platform for public opinion in the Chinese society, government agencies began to take the initiative to take part on weibo. Therefore, numerous official accounts with verified identity were launched on weibo. Government agencies at all bureaucratic levels and all administrative functions start to use weibo to connect citizens (qtd in Tong & Lei, 2012, 309). These verified government accounts publish and update government activities/ information, communicate and interact with netizens. More importantly, the Chinese government even initiates national politics agenda through weibo platforms to encourage public's political participation, for example the annual meetings of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and the National People's Congress (NPC). This

² Lei Zhengfu, was formerly the Chongqing Beibei District Party Secretary. He was sacked from his position a few days after a sex video recorded 5 years ago went online via Sina Weibo. The video was created for the purpose of blackmail by the collusion of a property developer and an 18-year girl named Zhao Hongxia.

³ June 9 2013, four officials were exposed on Sina Weibo by an anonymous account on Sina Weibo with a video of hiring prostitutes in a hotel in Shanghai. These four officials include three judges, all four serve at the Shanghai Municipal Higher People's Court.

⁴ Bo Xilai, the former Chinese politician and secretary of the Communist Party's Chongqing branch, was exposed with bribery, abuse of power and corruption by Wang Lijun incident. August 22 2013, his entire trail went "lived microblogging" on weibos and caused numerous discussions.

case will be analyzed as the second case study in later section. Evidently, weibo has become one of the major government advocating/communication platforms towards the public. Such seemingly intimate connection with citizens on a social media platform is unprecedented in traditional Chinese politics landscape.

4. Case studies

Based on the understanding of the dominant features of weibo, we can now study specific cases in weibo in order to deeper analyze how the online discourse of weibo discussion flows. In this section I will conduct two case studies with the purposes of finding evidence of how weibo plays a role in shaping public opinions and political sphere, which supported by some of the important features explored above. As mentioned, those features of weibo are the key components that facilitate the role of weibo in shaping public sphere and some of the features will be discussed during the studies. Although the role of each feature with its contribution for each case will not carry into detail discussions, it is important to be aware of that many weibo incidents/cases won't be able to achieve certain social impact without the incorporation of those important features. The first case study is about the online discourse of Guo Meimei incident based on Sina Weibo; the second case study is regarding the civic engagement of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and the National People's Congress (NPC) that based on weibo in general. Further, though the studies of these two cases, the analysis of sociopolitical implications and challenges of weibo phenomenon will also be carried into the discussion. Moreover, it is necessary to note that because the limitation of English material in specific cases, there are a part of the relevant materials and

statistics sources I used for supporting these case studies were from the Chinese language.

4.1 Case study one: the Guo Meimei incident

The Guo Meimei incident — a famous incident on Sina Weibo in 2011 and 2013, which was well known as the scandal of Red Cross Society of China (RCSC), the member of International Red Cross Society and the largest charity organization in China. The Guo Meimei incident had received more than 640, 000 weibo-posts regarding the controversy it caused (People's Daily Online, 2011). Almost two years later, also through Sina Weibo, this incident surprisingly came back to public attention because of the Ya'an earthquake ⁵, became the subsequent impact of this incident. It is interesting to find out the power of Sina Weibo in framing public opinion and depth social implication.

Timeline of the Guo Meimei incident:

June 2, 2011: Guo Meimei flaunted her rich life-style on her Sina Weibo account with a verified identity of general manager of Red Cross Commerce, and quickly drawing attention of netizens.

June 21, 2011: Guo posted a clarify statement of her identity that she was employed by a company called Red Cross of Commerce which had a cooperation relationship with RCSC.

⁵ The Ya'an earthquake (or Lushan earthquake) occurred at 08:02 Beijing Time (00:02 UTC) on April 20, 2013. The magnitude of the earthquake was placed at M_s 7.0 by China Earthquake Data Center. The epicenter was located in Lu Shan County, Ya'an, Sichuan province of China.

June 22, 2011: The RSCS issued a public statement saying that Red Cross does not have a Red Cross Commerce, nor a position of general commerce manager and did not have hire Guo Meimei.

June 23, 2011: Sina Weibo openly apologized to the public that there had been an error on Guo Meimei's identity verification.

July 1, 2011: The RCSC decided to suspend all the work of Red Cross Society Commercial Systems and invited accounting institute to audit its finances.

July 4, 2011: The RCSC has launched its Sina Weibo accounts and responded regarding the Guo Meimei incident.

July 7, 2011: The Beijing Public Security Bureau published three weibo-posts saying that investigations have revealed that Guo Meimei had no direct ties with the RCSC.

April 20, 2013: Ya'an earthquake happened, all of the posts of RSCS regarding the donations of Ya'an earthquake had received large amount of malicious comments from the netizens.

April 23, 2013: Yong Wang, a member of RCSC Social Supervision Committee publicly suggests that RCSC should reinvestigate Guo Meimei case.

June 11, 2013: The suggestion of reinvestigation failed because it only backed up by two votes out of sixteen members within the committee.

June 14, 2013: The committee announced that the previous investigation the Society conducted on the case had already come to a clear conclusion, and it suggested that the society launch a new investigation if new evidence is found about the case.

4.1.1 The Guo Meimei incident occurred in 2011

In June 2011, Red Cross Society of China's came under fire after a credibility scandal erupted on Sina Weibo in China (China Daily, June 2011). Sina Weibo users were infuriated when a 20-year-old woman named Guo Meimei, who claimed on her Sina Weibo profile with a verified identity to be the "general manager" of a company called Red Cross Commerce, boasted about her luxurious lifestyle, showing off her Maserati and Lamborghini cars, expensive handbags and palatial villa. The furious netizens began to question by posting and/or reposting on Sina Weibo whether Guo had financed her lifestyle out of money that had been donated to the Society and started a "human flesh search" to find out the identity of Guo Meimei and her connection with the RCSC (ChinaDaily.com, July 2011). Soon there was rumors about the suspicion of Guo Meimei was the daughter of Changjiang Guo, who was the Vice Chairman of RSCS, along with other rumors spreading. Thus, the controversy went huge rapidly and became one of the hottest Sina Weibo topics at the period (Sina Weibo, 2011). In the circumstances, on 4th July, around three weeks after the controversy was occurred, the Red Cross Society of China has launched its Sina Weibo accounts and directly published three weibo-posts regarding the history of RCSC. In the meantime, the Secretary General of RCSC, Rupeng Wang initiated an interaction with netizens on Sina Weibo, to answer questions concerning to the Red Cross Society of China and response regarding the Guo Meimei incident. Wang answered thirteen questions and within 24 hours, all of his responses weibo-posts had received approximately 42,600 comments and reposts. Most of the comments doubted his responses and more than half of the comments required "return the money" (Chinanews.com, July 5, 2011). Although both Guo and the Society publicly denied having any ties to one another, continuous disclosures of

inside stories and disputes over this incident flooded the Internet and weibo. However, these public responses sound like official documents and were oversimplistic, not only failed to calm the storm and appease the public, but also aroused greater suspicions (Liu & Yang, 2013). Therefore, the Red Cross Society of China was plunged into an unprecedented crisis of trust.

4.1.2 Reinvestigation of the Guo Meimei incident in 2013

Two years later, in April 2013, a serious earthquake happened in Ya'an, a town in southern China. Red Cross Society of China quickly initiated the call to public donations and posted all the disaster relief information on their Sina Weibo account. But almost every post they published was being mocked by thousands of nearly one-sided malicious comments from weibo users. Many comments directly pointed out that they will no longer trust Red Cross Society of China because of Guo Meimei scandal or will not donate any money to them because they believed the money will go to Guo Meimei's next luxury cars and bags. Most of the comments only contain one word “滚” (pronounced “gun”, literally means “go away”, it can be translated as “fuck off”) but multiple times and many exclamation points, or the emoticons of a thumb down icon (See examples below).

青海省红十字会为雅安灾区紧急安排棉帐篷、棉被、防潮垫等救灾物资，即刻运往灾区，并紧急组派13人的应急救援队伍，其中青海红十字蓝天救援队8人，省红十字会工作人员5人，赶赴灾区开展抢救生命、应急救援工作。

4月20日22:14 来自专业版微博

转发(3162) | 收藏 | 评论(24019)



Image 2 & 3. Source: *Sina Weibo* screenshot, *RSCS account*, April 20, 2013

The most direct impact of this public reaction was a collective action that many people and organizations chose to donate to Ya'an earthquake through other official charity organizations instead of the Red Cross Society of China. Many opinion leaders, such as celebrities and entrepreneurs, openly published on their weibo accounts with the information about their donations to another charity organization, for instance One Foundation ⁶. During the period of the controversy, more scandals of RCSC goes around on weibo such as “RCSC staffs did not allow distributing the relief supplies to Ya’an affected people because of the media had not yet arrived”; and “RCSC did not allow their Taiwan distribution to enter Ya’an to offer help unless they have donated one million Yuan” (ChinaNews.com, April 2013).

Regardless of the authenticity of those scandals, the situation has aroused public discussion of the subsequent impact of the Guo Meimei incident almost two years later, and the continue trust crisis Red Cross Society of China was

⁶ One Foundation (Chinese: 壹基金), full title Shenzhen One Foundation (Chinese: 深圳壹基金公益基金会), was registered on December 3, 2010, as an independent public fundraising foundation in China.

facing. Many authorized medias were directly pointed out the Society was having a serious credibility crisis and they need to rebuild the public trust by reforming the organization with completely transparent management and even reinvestigate Guo Meimei case. Under the circumstance, on 23th April 2013, three days after Ya'an earthquake, Yong Wang, a member of RCSC Social Supervision Committee publicly suggests that RCSC should reinvestigate Guo Meimei case, "The RCSC will never shake off the taint and restore its reputation unless the public's doubts in the scandal get fully investigated and explained," Wang said (People.cn, June 2013). This suggestion of reinvestigating Guo Meimei case led the public an expectation for truth. Unfortunately, on 11th June 2013, this suggestion was finally failed because it only backed up by two votes out of sixteen members within the committee (People.cn, 2013). The Red Cross Society of China's social supervision committee said it has decided not to reinvestigate Guo Meimei case. Huang Weimin, Secretary-General of the committee, told a news conference on June 14 that the committee believed that the previous investigation the Society conducted on the case had already came to a clear conclusion, and it suggested that the society launch a new investigation if new evidence is found about the case (China Daily, June 2013). This news has led to another public outcry, but such a result seems to be among the expectation. The result of this entire event reveals that the Red Cross Society of China still could not cross this credibility crisis and they need to have much more courage for facing the truth and public controversy (People.cn, June 2013).

4.1.3 Social impact

The direct social impact of the Guo Meimei incident was that the image of the Red Cross Society of China collapsed and they paid a high price for the Guo

Meimei incident (China Public Relation, June 2013). According to the data in 2011, the Red Cross Society of China had received donations of about 2.867 billion Yuan, accounting for 3.4% of the national total donations, compared with last year, RCSC's donations had declined of almost 60% (China Civil Affairs Statistic, 2012). Beside the credibility damage that the Guo Meimei incident had inflicted to Red Cross Society, it had also widely affected the entire charity industries in China. Since late June 2011, right after the Guo Meimei incident, national social contributions and donations sharply dropped. Data has shown that on July 2011, the total national social donations amount were about 500 million, a decline of more than 50% while compared with June; the total donations number to charity organizations from June to August 2011 were declined by 86.6% (China Civil Affairs Statistic, 2011). Staffs from both Red Cross Society of China and China Civil Affairs admitted the negative social influence was affected by the Guo Meimei incident. In April 2013 when it comes to Ya'an earthquake, public donations were more preferred to the non-governmental charity organization. As of April 20 evenings, the same day Ya'an earthquake has occurred, the Red Cross Society of China has received a donation of only 14 thousands Yuan, while the One Foundation has reached 22.4 million Yuan. Although the RCSC sent out a rescue team at the first second right after the earthquake occurred, but its credibility crisis were far from being recovery (China Daily Economy, 2013).

4.1.4 Analysis

Throughout this case study, one can discover that Sina Weibo has played a critical role in the Guo Meimei incident which was sufficiently facilitated by some of its important features such as information diffusion, platform for free speech

and exposure, as well as the participation of mass media. These features were fully embodied through the flow of online discourse that took place on Sina Weibo. All kinds of information regarding the Guo Meimei incident that including texts, pictures and videos had disseminated through Sina Weibo to public. A part of this information could actually assist the public being closer to the truth. According to the reliable survey (2011), the platforms that netizens used for the discussion of the Guo Meimei incident, 22.46% used weibos; 18.73% used forums; 18.36% used blogs; 16.75% used QQ, 11.79% through news comments and 11.91% through other platforms, and weibo was the fastest growing platform (Figure 1).

Platforms Netizens Used for the Guo Meimei Incident

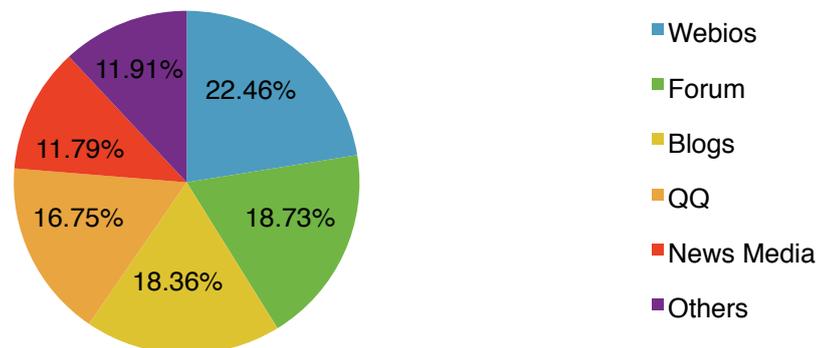


Figure 1. Source: The Guo Meimei Incident Network Survey, *1diaocha.com*, August 2011.

In addition, the Guo Meimei incident was first exposure on Sina Weibo and immediately expanded to the field of mass media and had reached 18,500 news reports related to the incident just within a month (China Daily, 2011). This phenomenon enlarges the power of information diffusion. With the Guo Meimei incident, one can see how Sina Weibo in shaping public opinion by offering a unique platform where netizens could express their views through engagement of this public

incident. Sina Weibo formatted collective voice. As Wang (2012) suggests, “Sina Weibo provide a relatively autonomous space to allow deliberative discourses to take place” (Wang, 2012, 376). “This is where public opinion is being formed”, said Peking University journalism professor Hu Yong.

Through the Guo Meimei incident, it also reveals the negative sides of weibo where rumors could extensively spread and netizens being manipulated by malicious speculation. During the time of its exposure, numerous rumors about Guo were spreading on Sina Weibo. Many Sina Weibo users with ulterior motives took the opportunity to fabricate all kinds of rumors associated with Guo in order to attract attention and create chaos, such as Guo was killed in Marco; Guo was the girlfriend of Wang Jun, CEO of the company that had business cooperation with the Red Cross Society of China; Guo Meimei sexual bribed government officials, etc. The incident continually simmered also because these rumors were being largely reposted on Sina Weibo and netizens being manipulated. Obviously, beside the positive parts weibo in shaping public opinion, it also becomes a breeding ground for rumors and manipulation. As Lu and Qiu indicate, “microblogging contributes to the dissemination of rumors”; with the limit of 140 characters, allows for selective presentations and the viral dissemination allows rumor to reach large number of people in a short time (Lu and Qiu, 2013, 316). Also, while rumors affect people’s access to truth, manipulation distorts their perception of reality, it can thus achieve the purposes changing the public opinion to certain direction (Lu and Qiu, 2013). Interestingly, although people might be aware of the false information, but they still rather discuss and repost them. As Yu (2011) stresses, people are more sensitive to information that is considered negative and microblog offers the platform where social conflict could be expressed in the rise of negative information. Even weibo offers a platform where people can express their opinion freely, but the

dissemination of rumors will hinder the process of positive social change in Chinese society (Lu & Qiu, 2013).

From another perspective, the Guo Meimei incident itself might just a motive for social reaction of trusts crisis. Before the Guo Meimei incident, there were already multiple scandals about the corruption of charity organizations in China, included the RCSC. Regardless the authenticity of some of the rumors of Guo, this incident reflected the public doubt of RCSC's ability and its closed operations, it also mirrored the growing social conflicts (Sina, July 28, 2011). The Guo Meimei incident became a trigger that people can ultimately vent their anger and opinions publicly by participating this topic on weibo — a new rise free speech platform, where netizens can present their opinions collectively and made their voice stronger and being heard. Before weibo era, this kind of online engagement was nearly impossible. However, throughout this case study, one can find out the tremendous power of Sina Weibo has been completely demonstrated, it has successfully shaped the public opinion and caused positive social implication.

4.2 Case Study two: The civic engagement on weibo in the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and the National People's Congress (NPC)

This case study is regarding the civic engagement on weibo with the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) ⁷ and the National

⁷ The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) is a political advisory body in the People's Republic of China. The organization consists of delegates from a range of political parties and organizations, as well as independent members. The proportion of representation of the various parties is determined by established convention, negotiated between the parties.

People's Congress (NPC) ⁸. CPPCC and NPC are the annual plenary sessions that are considered as two of the biggest Chinese public and political agenda of the year, and they are normally held in March every year in Beijing at the same time. In China, the CPPCC National Committee and NPC plenary sessions are often referred to as the “national *Lianghui*” (The National Two Meetings, *Lianghui* means the two meetings in shortened Chinese), making important national level political decisions. In this case study, I will investigate the traditional communication models of the two meetings before weibo era to demonstrate the differences and changes weibo has brought to the Chinese politics climate. Moreover, I will provide examples in how weibo enabling political participation, and what kind of the political impacts and limitations were reflected through the phenomenon.

4.2.1 The traditional communication models of the national *Lianghui*

Before the detail analysis of civic engagement with the national *Lianghui*, it is important to investigate the traditional ways in which CPPCC and NPC engage the communication with public before weibo era. There was a report conducted by Tencent in 2009 about the communication models of two meetings. Before weibo era, from 1991 to 2009, the communication model with public of two meetings could be divided into three models: 1) the Initial model, 2) the 1.0 model and 3) the 2.0 model as following examples (Tencent, March 9, 2009):

The first model —the initial model, the communication of the national two meetings was conducted as two meetings → media (advocating to) → public. A

⁸ The National People's Congress (NPC) is the national legislature of the People's Republic of China, a consultative body whose members represents various social groups, is the main deliberative bodies of China. With 2,987 members in 2013, it is the largest parliamentary body in the world. Under China's current Constitution, the NPC is structured as a unicameral legislature, with the power to legislate, the power to oversee the operations of the government, and the power to elect the major officers of state.

Chinese journalist Baozhu Yu who have been participated in the national two meetings for nineteen years, he recalled, “In 1991, the first time I participated in the national *Lianghui*, there only were about two to three hundreds of journalists from different mass medias that had participated the national *Lianghui*. The first competing news point was when all leaders walking into the ceremony of the national *Lianghui*. When leaders of the party and state standing on the podium, that’s the time when all the camera flash was on at the same time, then the journalists and photographers had to run back for writing the news report and advocated to the public”. The next day, the public can only received the information about the two meetings that issued by the major newspapers such as the People's Daily. At that time there were almost no laptops, no digital camera, and according to the rules, the official photos of the podium were only allowed to use issued photo by Xinhua News Agency that pointed directly by the party and state. That’s how the national *Lianghui* communicate with the public in the early period, one of the typical propaganda communication model: sender—channel—receiver.

The second model — 1.0 model, the communication was engaged as the two meetings ← (focusing by) media → public. With public growing interests in expression mechanism, Chinese media started to focus on the national two meetings. In 1999, network media entered the national *Lianghui* for the first time. In 2011, China Central Television — CCTV cooperated with the national two meetings and initiated a special live program called “*Xiaoya*⁹ *with Lianghui*” (小丫跑两会). Soon, they had also launched “*Chai Jing’s*¹⁰ *observation of Lianghui*” (柴静两会观察) and

⁹ Xiaoya, referred as to a famous TV presenter of CCTV who named Xiaoya Wang.

¹⁰ Chai Jing, a famous TV presenter of CCTV, a Chinese journalist and author.

“*Quan Ling*¹¹ *look at Lianghui*” (泉灵看两会), etc. Further, regional medias such as local newspapers were also eager to engage with the two meetings, many of them entered Beijing and tried to catch any valuable recourse information that could expand the influence of their newspapers. To some extent, this phenomenon has broken the first communication model that only relied on the sources released by the major printed media and the state. The 1.0 model had updated to a more dynamic format for Chinese citizens to receive information of the two meetings in different angles, but the public still has to go through the media platforms that are strictly control by the state.

The third model before the weibo era — 2.0 model, was conducted as public ← (interactive with) → media ← (interactive with) → the two meetings. Since 2006, the network media started to be active and initiated some online columns, such as "I have a question to ask the Prime Minister" and other sections to provide channel for the people to express their views. February 28 in 2009, just before the two meeting start, the Prime Minister of China at the time — Jiabao Wen had an online conversation with netizens regarding issues of high housing prices, financial crisis and the reform of the household registration system, etc. In this regard, some domestic mainstream media commented that China's Internet politics were getting better and the Internet age gives new meaning to the traditional Chinese politics. Different with model 1.0, the 2.0 communication model allows people to express their views and needs through media. In addition, public media also like to pay more attention to online public opinion and interact with citizens and members/deputies of the *Lianghui*.

¹¹ Quan Ling, a TV presenter of CCTV.

The above models were considered as the traditional communication of the national *Lianghui* from 1991 to 2009. In other words, this communication model may also reflect the tradition Chinese politics style as a whole. However, according to the report, the model 2.0 still had the property of the initial and the 1.0 model, because a rational debate mechanism has not yet produced. The two meetings stay in a stage of so-called “the great events of Chinese people's political life”, and it has not completely got rid of political overtones. In addition, the report ended with a question of how could the communication model update to 3.0 that are more transparent to the public, and directly interact with the citizens. With the concern, weibo entered China in 2009 and new communication model in Chinese society is built. Since 2010, the second year of weibo's inception, it has already offered the communication channel where public can directly communicate with the two meetings by interacting with members of the CPPCC and deputies of the NPC, and even recommended proposals. The following subsections will conduct a detail analysis of how weibo enable civic engagement of political participation in China.

4.2.2 Weibo and the national *Lianghui*

Ever since weibo was launched in 2009, its rapid and successful development not only caused the attention of public but also attracted government and politics in China. As argue, weibo has the function of enabling peoples voice and especially many political scandals and events were exposed and/or widely discussed on weibo as the examples have shown earlier. Xiao addresses social media can be “an avenue for feedback and accountability” using by government and online public opinion format playing an important role in the future development of Chinese society (Xiao, 2011, 54). The power of weibo is expected to set up a new and closer

connection between ordinary citizens and the country's most important political affairs. Since 2010, the two meetings of CPPCC and NPC started to engage this important political affair on weibo by live-microblogging the entire event and interact with netizens. Deputies of NPC and members of CPPCC have launched their weibo accounts in succession, to interact with netizens by posting their proposals for the *Lianghui* to asked suggestions and comments. Until 2014, this kind of weibo — *Lianghui* interaction has been continued for five year.

According to data in 2012, Sina Weibo had 408 verified NPC deputies and CPPCC members, with the growth of 100 while compared with 2011. In 2013, there were 335 representatives of CPPCC and NPC that actively interacted with netizens among six microblog platforms, to discuss proposals that mainly focus on the national-concerned issues in terms of environmental issues, cultural development, food security and health care reformation (People.cn, March 25, 2013). According to statistics in 2014 of Wuhan University of Internet Science Research Center, from 0:00 on March 3 to 17:00 on March 8 2014, related weibo-posts of the national *Lianghui* were about 3,162,200 in total. These weibo-posts were all associated with the most concerned issues in China at the time, for instance governance haze, GM food issues, bus system reformation and merger of pension (China.com.cn, March 10, 2014).

4.2.3 Examples

As an example on Sina Weibo 2011, almost three weeks before the two meetings, topics of the two meetings were already being actively discussed. February 11, the CEO of LTC, Dongsheng Li posted on his verified Sina Weibo account through mobile weibo application, “the national *Lianghui* will soon be held, I as a member of

CPPCC, would like to promote proposals to improve the livelihood of the people, including the regulation of housing-prices, improvement of education and health services, improvement of the social welfare and individual income tax...here I would like to hear your voice on this weibo platform” (Authors translation). This weibo-post was quickly attracted more than 2,300 comments and 10,000 reposts within one day. One of the netizens commented, “I am confident with Mr. Li, hopefully you will bring our voice the two meetings, to get our problems solved”. Later, Li responded, “There will be possibility to solve the problems if everyone is involved” (Sina news, March 27, 2011).

As another example on Tencent Weibo in 2013, before the two meetings were held, many members/deputies used micro-interview format through Tencent Weibo to communicate with the public, and they had answered more than 300 questions and collected more than 250 recommended proposals from netizens. The interaction between members/deputies and citizens has provided public opinion to modify and improve proposals of the two meetings (Tencent, March 15, 2013). In the meantime, the conference hall of the national two meetings initiated a topic of “#*Lianghui*#” on Tencent Weibo, to offer a platform for netizens to engage with the affairs. Until midnight on March 11, only one week after two meetings were held, Tencent Weibo received more than 41,640.000 weibo-posts related *Lianghui* issues. There were more than 410,000 weibo-posts related to the discussion of different proposals, and the amount of *Lianghui* weibo-posts been read by netizens was over 229 million (Tencent news, March 15, 2013).

4.2.4 Analysis

During the time while the two meetings were forming the relationships with citizens through weibo, there were even popular terms of this *weibo-Lianghui* phenomenon are widely used by the public and media, such as “*weibo kan Lianghui*” (微博看两会), it literally means weibo look at the two meetings, which can be translated as “the two meetings with weibo focus”; and “*weibo wen zheng*” (微博问政), literally means weibo ask politics, which can be translated as “seek advice from netizens through weibo”. The public and collective engagement has shortened the distance between government and ordinary citizens. As Lin emphasizes that using new platform to express opinions to influence policymaking is a “bottom-up participation that changes the relationship between government and citizens profoundly” (Lin, 2010, 524). Further, weibo enables peoples voice by offering a platform where anyone, including grassroots, to participate in such political affairs and have directly interaction with deputies of NPC and members of CCPPC. This kind of the civic engagement in political events were rather important, as Xiao states, “these ‘public events’ now play a role in promoting human rights, freedom of expression, the rule of law, and governmental accountability”(Xiao, 2011, 59). Besides, for individuals can hardly influence the political process in single units, instead the public opinions engaged on weibo can serve as a powerful surveillant pressing the government. Likewise, more and more Chinese people are turning to weibo to vent their anger over government corruption, scandals and disasters in a country where authorities maintain a tight grip on the media. That’s why the term of “*weibo fanfu*” (微博反腐) which means “weibo anti-corruption”, this term is also widely used by the public. The government—weibo phenomenon symbolizes a forward social change in China.

However, although government began to use weibo but many of accounts were only active for a short time or used for empty rhetoric; the weibo channel was simply another one-way channel to broadcast information that they want people to have (Lu and Qiu, 2013). As Lin (2010) also notes, the government online advocacy is neither a useless instrument manipulated by the government nor a panacea leading to a society thriving for a more civil freedom. On the other hand, the high degree of openness and virtuality of weibo offers a platform where much irresponsible rumors or false information were spreading for the purpose of creating chaos, such as a Vice Mayor of Shanghai government who was arrested at the security checkpoint of an airport because he carried huge amounts of aphrodisiac into China from Japan. The news was later proved to be false. This kind of the rumors affected the image of government officials with purposes. Also, some mass media channels adopted the unverified information source directly from weibo just for a fast “exclusive news report”. Weibo can definitely facilitate the dissemination of rumors and a misdirection of public opinion towards the government. If the government cannot adapt well to political participation on weibo, it will exacerbate the decline in the government's position in the minds of the average Chinese citizen. However, the civic engagement of the two meetings on weibo has shortened the distance between ordinary citizens and the government. More importantly, weibo opened up an important channel for civic political participation that has never happened in the traditional Chinese politics before. But limitations of weibo in political possibilities should be considered and the ability of weibo should not be magnified.

5. Discussions

By studying the specific cases above, I have shown that weibo plays a significant role in shaping public sphere. It is important to realize that when weibo offers the platform for public opinions and political possibilities, it also brings limitations and challenges as the possible consequences that the Chinese society has to face. For instance, the characters of weibo could also give the possibility for network violence and negative feelings, because they are highly emotional online opinion expression that are normally lack of the skill to develop a proposition and without logic reasoning or argument (Lu & Qiu, 2013; Lin, 2010). Communication channel such as weibo convey rather unorganized and emotional behavior of citizens (Lin, 2010). Besides, many opinion leaders are unable to influence the society in a positive way for they are sometime as emotional and irrational as grassroots users that affected blind follower (Lu & Qiu, 2013). Furthermore, many public affairs stay focus only for a short time that would quickly be replaced, because public focus will shift to another more current or debatable matters (Lin, 2010). Each public opinion event has an active period, they are generally ephemeral and the average active period is only lasting about fifteen days (Lu & Qiu, 2013; Yu 2011). Yu (2011) explains that microblogging exposes a huge number of public events to an online audience but also inhibits their ability to maintain consistent focus on any single one. As Lu and Qiu (2013) suggest, one of the main character of weibo is entertainment, the focus of entertainment not only encourage Internet violence and spreading rumors, but also distracting people from collectively participating in public events.

Besides, the Internet censorship conducted by the Chinese central government is also a great challenge to Chinese citizens. As one of the major functions of weibo is enabling free speech, but in fact, there was never absolute free

speech because Chinese government still has strong control among the Internet. To comply with the government's content regulations, all Chinese weibo providers must establish an internal censorship department to filter sensitive posts, and a concrete system with censored keywords (Fu, Chan & Chua, 2013). For example, Sina reportedly set up a censorship department of a thousand people to monitor weibo-posts. One can instantly see weibo-posts were deleted within a short time that appeared "your post is inappropriate". This sort of the deleted weibo-posts occurs daily on weibo. Obviously, free speech function of weibo is often interfered by censorship. As an example have shown on April 11, 2014, a Sina weibo-post with the following Chinese passage was removed minutes later, although the user complained that nothing was inappropriate in the post (China Media Project, April 2014):

Citizens, let us begin from this moment. No matter where you are, no matter what your profession, rich or poor, let us in the depths of our hearts, in our daily lives, on the internet, and on every inch of this vast land, firmly and loudly declare the identity that rightfully belongs to us: I am a citizen; we are citizens (Authors Translation)¹².

After the post was removed, Sina Weibo sent a personal message to the user (see image 4):



Image 4. Source: Sina Weibo screenshot, *China Media Project*, April 2014

¹² Original post in Chinese: “公民们，就让我们从现在开始吧。无论你身在何处，无论你从事何种职业，无论你贫穷还是富裕，让我们在内心深处，在现实生活中，在互联网上，在中华大地的每一寸土地上，坚定而自豪地说出本来属于我们的身份：我是公民，我们是公民。”

Hello, you have been informed on by another user for violation of regulations. According to Sina Weibo Community Management Regulations, your post made on April 11, 2014, at 11:39:37, “Citizens, let us begin from this moment...” has already been designated as inappropriate for public sharing (Author’s Translation).

However, Internet censorship is nothing new in China as the well known *the great firewall of China*. In fact, Chinese netizens are fully aware of the Chinese government style that always favorite in censorship, and they have strategies against them. First, there are large amount of the netizens use virtual private network (VPN) software to “scale the wall” to obtain the blocked information, use the websites that are blocked in China for example Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. Although the number of people using Twitter in China is approximately only one percent of those using weibos (Sullivan, 2012). Second of all, for avoiding censored keywords or sensitive words, netizens created large amount of the network terminology that could be used freely without being filtered. This strategy facilitated even more with advantages of the Chinese language, that many words could be reorganized and words that have similar pronunciation. For example, netizens use *tianchao* (天朝) as a metaphor for “the government”, *hexie* (河蟹) represent “being filtered”, or *GCD* to replace the Chinese Communist Party, and they are widely used in different social media platforms including weibo. However, this become a popular Internet cultural and shows the positive strategy of Chinese citizens to seek more freedom space. Besides the government’s censorship, there is another urgent factor of weibo has to face is the Sharp declined of its users’ activity. After weibo’s heyday in 2012, users’ activity and viscosity seems to be gradually declining, with the latest

data in April 2014, only five percent of users produced original updates (Journalism and Media Studies Centre of University of Hong Kong, 2014). This phenomenon may reveal the nature of weibo — a social networking site is ultimately had to face the competition with other social media platforms. For instance, a new rise popular social media application launched by Tencent in 2011—WeChat, a mobile-base social network platform with more than 500 million users by the end of August 2013 (Tencent Data, 2013). Such a situation definitely affected the role weibo plays in public sphere and the future of weibo is concerned.

In conclusion, I have analyzed the background of Chinese Internet and microblogging as the primary reasons for the prevalent weibo phenomenon in China. I have demonstrated the dominant features that are the linking components for weibo in shaping public sphere. These features are 1) information diffusion, 2) platform for free speech, social connections and exposure, 3) opinion leaders and verified identity, 4) participation of mass media and government. Through the case studies, I have shown that the use of weibo has facilitated public opinion and political participation. Further, I have argued that the weibo phenomenon has brought significant sociopolitical implications and challenges to the Chinese society. Indeed, the power of weibo brings revolutionary significance, but it should not be viewed as a quick-fix tool or panacea for the changes in China. The limitations and challenges of weibo should be considered to improve the role it plays in the future social progress. Most importantly, one has to be aware of the initial reason behind the weibo phenomenon was the long-term social conflicts in the Chinese society, which was created by the state's strictly information controls and the falling government credibility. It is also important to realize Chinese citizens' free speech and political participation cannot be only relied on the Internet or weibo. In other words, Chinese citizens need a practical platform for exercising their expressing

rights that supported by the legal system. They also need a country for free media, government transparency and democratic political participation. These are the fundamental factors for the real social changes in China.

Works Cited

- “Annual Report of Sina Government Weibo, 2013” (2013 年新浪政务微博报告). *Renming.cn*. December 27, 2013. Available at: <
<http://zj.sina.com.cn/city/cityfocus/251/2013/1227/10041.html>>
- Anti, Michael. “Behind the Great Firewall of China”. *TedTalks*. June 2012. Available at:
 <http://www.ted.com/talks/michael_anti_behind_the_great_firewall_of_china>
- Buhl, Hans Ulrich. “From Revolution to Participation: Social Media and the Democratic Decision-Making Process”. *Business & Information Systems Engineering*. 2011.
- Fu, King-Wa; Chan, Chung-Hong & Chau, Michael “Assessing Censorship on Microblogs in China: Discriminatory Keyword Analysis and the Real-Name Registration Policy”, *Internet Computing, IEEE*. 2013.
- Gillmor, Dan. “We the Media: Grassroots Journalism By the People, For the People”. *O'Reilly Media*. 2004.
- Huang, Ronggui; Sun, Xiaoyi. “Weibo network, information diffusion and implications for collective action in China”. *Information, Communication & Society*. 2014.
- Lagerkvist, Johan. “After the Internet, Before Democracy: Competing Norms in Chinese Media and Society”, chapter 4 and 5. 2010.
- Lee, Kai-Fu. “Micro-Blog: Changing the World” (微博改变一切). *Shanghai financial university press*, 2011.
- Lin, Minhua. “What are the impacts and limits of e-advocacy in China?”. *CEU Political Science Journal*. 2010.
- Lu, Jia; Qiu, Yunxi. “Microblogging and Social Change in China”. *Asian Perspective*. 2013.
- Luo, Liang. “Today’s Special Topic: The Communication Models of *Lianghui*”. *Tencent News*. March 9, 2009. Available at: < <http://view.news.qq.com/zt/2009/web/index.html> >
- Mergel, Ines. & Greeves, Bill. “Social Media in the Public Sector Field Guide: Designing and Implementing Strategies and Policies”. 2013.
- “Most Popular Daily Trends in May 2011”. *Sina News*. Available at: < <http://www.theworldofchinese.com/culture/daily-trending-topics.html> >

- Richburg, Keith B. "In China, Microblogging Sites Become Free-Speech Platform," *Washington Post*, 27 Mar. 2011.
- Sullivan, Jon. "A tale of Two Microblogs in China. *Media, Culture & Society*". 34(6): 773–789. 2012
- Tai, Zixue. "Historical Development of the Internet in China". *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society*. New York, Routledge, pp. 119–59. 2006.
- "The Guo Meimei Incident Network Survey". *1DiaoCha.com*. August 17 to 26, 2011. Available at: www.1diaoCha.com/survey/surveyresult_36689490209352.html >
- Tong, Yanqi & Lei, Shaohua. "War of Position and Microblogging in China". *Journal of Contemporary China*. 22, 292–311. 2012
- Wang, Wilfred Yang. "Weibo, Framing, and Media Practices in China". *Journal of Chinese Political Science*. 2012.
- Xiao, Qiang. "The Battle for the Chinese Internet". *Journal of Democracy*. 2011.
- Yu, Guoming. "Chinese Society Public Opinion, Annual Report 2011". *Beijing: People's Daily Press*. 2011.
- Zhang, Zhan & Negro, Gianluigi. "Weibo in China: Understanding its Development Through Communication Analysis and Cultural Studies". *Communication, Politics & Culture*. vol. 46, pp. 199–216. 2013.