

Online Political Protest in China: Its Causes and Implications

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This thesis examines the growing social phenomenon of online political protests in China. While studies have found that internet technologies have empowered the Chinese government to stifle political mobilization and dissent on the Internet, they failed to explain the proliferation of political protests in China's cyberspace. Other studies focused on how the Internet's technical features, contradictions within China's political system, or individuals' grievances contributed to the occurrence of online political protests. However, the principal limitation of these studies was that they could not explain why the effects of online political protests on China's political changes were so limited. This thesis presents an examination of the emergence and political impacts of China's online political protests. It employs the Political Opportunity Structure theory to explain why online political protests frequently occur in China and why they have not caused meaningful changes to China's political system. The thesis argues that the emergence and demise of China's online political protests are dependent upon four key factors--elite divisions, internet control, online social networks, and influential allies, which form political opportunity structures for online political protests. While the existence of elite divisions, capricious internet control, extensive online social networks, and the active role of influential allies cause the occurrence and development of online political protests, the disappearance of such factors will damage political opportunity structures for online political protests, thereby leading to their end. The thesis conducts three case studies--the Lei Yang event (雷洋事件), the Watch Brother event (表哥事件), and the Chai Jing event (柴静事件)--to test the validity of its main argument. The thesis represents a further step towards apply social movement theories to study acts of protest in China's cyberspace. Moreover, by examining the dynamic process of online political protests, it has provided a deeper insight into the role of the Internet in catalyzing political changes in China.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the growing social phenomenon of online political protests in China. While studies have found that internet technologies have empowered the Chinese government to stifle political mobilization and dissent on the Internet, they failed to explain the proliferation of political protests in China's cyberspace. Other studies focused on how the Internet's technical features, contradictions within China's political system, or individuals' grievances contributed to the occurrence of online political protests. However, the principal limitation of these studies was that they could not explain why the effects of online political protests on China's political changes were so limited. This thesis presents an examination of the emergence and political impacts of China's online political protests. It employs the Political Opportunity Structure theory to explain why online political protests frequently occur in China and why they have not caused meaningful changes to China's political system.

The thesis argues that the emergence and demise of China's online political protests are dependent upon four key factors—elite divisions, internet control, online social networks, and influential allies, which form political opportunity structures for online political protests. While the existence of elite divisions, capricious internet control, extensive online social networks, and the active role of influential allies cause the occurrence and development of online political protests, the disappearance of such factors will damage political opportunity structures for online political protests, thereby leading to their end. The thesis conducts three case studies—the Lei Yang event (雷洋事件), the Watch Brother event (表哥事件), and the Chai Jing event (柴静事件)—to test the validity of its main argument.

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List of Abbreviations

CCDI	Central Commission for Discipline Inspection
CCSILG	Central Cyber Security and Informatization Leading Group
CNNIC	China Internet Network Information Centre
CPD	Central Propaganda Department
CPLC	Central Political and Legal Commission
CPPCC	Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
DGT	Directorate General of Telecommunications
DIC	Discipline Inspection Committee
EPL	Environmental Protection Law
HFS	Human Flesh Search
IAPs	Internet Access Providers
ICTs	Information and communications technologies
ISPs	Internet Service Providers
MEI	Ministry of Electronics Industry
MEP	Ministry of Environmental Protection
MII	Ministry of Information Industry
MIIT	Ministry of Industry and Information Technology
MPS	Minister of Public Security
MPT	Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications
NDRC	National Development and Reform Commission
NEA	National Energy Administration
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NPC	National People's Congress
OCLGCA	Office of the Central Leading Group for Cyberspace Affairs
PTAs	Posts and Telecommunications Administrations

RMT	Resource mobilization theory
SASAC	State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission
SCILG	State Council Informatization Leading Group
SCIO	State Council Information Office
UGC	User Generated Content

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Objectives of This Study

This thesis aims at exploring the online interaction between the state and society in China. In particular, it focuses on examining the growing social phenomenon of online political protests. Many studies have reported that the Chinese party-state severely restricts freedom of speech and ruthlessly suppresses political dissent.¹ However, political protests occur frequently in China's cyberspace. They coexist with the government's constantly upgrading internet control instead of fading away as many scholars assumed. Additionally, China's online political protests often come to a sudden end before fulfilling their objectives rather than causing a fundamental change to the political system as argued by some other scholars. The existing literature fails to explain these puzzles. By applying the Political Opportunity Structure theory, this thesis aims to explain why online political protests frequently occur under such an authoritarian regime and why their impacts on China's political changes are limited.

The Internet in China has developed rapidly since the late 1980s. On 14 September 1987, China sent out the first email, which is said to contain the message "Beyond the Great Wall, joining the world" (越过长城, 走向世界).² On 1 January 1995, the Ministry of

¹ "Political dissent" in modern China refers to expression designed to convey criticisms about or dissatisfaction with the Chinese government. Major themes of political dissent contain human rights, socialist legality, and constitutional order. See Timothy Cheek, "Political Dissent," *Oxford Bibliographies*, 2017, accessed 07 July, 2019, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199920082/obo-9780199920082-0141.xml>. For more information about the Chinese government's restriction of freedom of speech and suppression of political dissent, see Freedom House's annual reports entitled "Worst of the Worst: The World's Most Repressive Societies," and the Economist Intelligence Unit's "the Democracy Index."

² Jack Linchuan Qiu, "The Internet in China: Data and Issues" paper presented at the Annenberg Research Seminar on International Communication, 2003.

Posts and Telecommunications (邮电部) started to provide internet access services for society.³ Since then, China's Internet has entered a period of rapid growth. According to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC),⁴ the number of internet users in China rose substantially from less than 40,000 in 1995 to 829 million in December 2018.⁵ The number of China's internet users reached about 253 million in June 2008, making it overtake the United States to become the country with the largest online population.⁶ As of December 2018, the Internet penetration rate⁷ had reached 59.6 percent, and the number of websites in China rose to 5.23 million.⁸ More importantly, social media in China is exploding nationwide. Although the Chinese government has blocked many popular foreign websites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, there are many Chinese equivalents, such as Renren (人人网, equivalent of Facebook), Youku (优酷, equivalent of YouTube), Sina Weibo (新浪微博, equivalent of Facebook and Twitter combined), and WeChat (微信, equivalent of WhatsApp). According to a survey made by McKinsey, 95 percent of people living in China's Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 cities⁹ are registered on a social media website.¹⁰ China's social media users have built complex

³ ChinaDaily, "Evolution of the Internet in China," 2016, accessed 15 January, 2017, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016even/index.html>.

⁴ CNNIC is the organization authorized by the Office of the Central Leading Group for Cyberspace Affairs to provide official statistics regarding the development of Internet in China. For more information, see <http://www.cnnic.net.cn>.

⁵ China Internet Network Information Center, The 43th China Statistical Report on Internet Development (Beijing, 2019), http://www.cac.gov.cn/2019-02/28/c_1124175686.htm.

⁶ David Barboza, "China Surpasses U.S. In Number of Internet Users," *The New York Times*, 2008, accessed 12 December, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/26/business/worldbusiness/26internet.html>.

⁷ The Internet penetration rate corresponds to the percentage of the total population of a given country or region that uses the Internet. See IGI Global, "What Is Internet Penetration Rate," accessed 15 July, 2016, <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/internet-penetration-rate/15439>.

⁸ China Internet Network Information Center, "The 43th China Statistical Report on Internet Development."

⁹ For more on China's tiered city system, see Matt Slater, "Urban Legend: China's Tiered City System Explained," *Chinacheckup*, 2018, accessed 15 July, 2018, <https://www.chinacheckup.com/blogs/articles/china-city-tiers>.

¹⁰ Cindy Chiu, Chris Ip, and Ari Silverman, "Understanding Social Media in China," *McKinsey Quarterly*, 2012, accessed 27 September, 2017, <http://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/marketing-and-sales/our-insights/understanding-social-media-in-china>.

online interpersonal networks, and they are sharing and creating an extensive amount of information on the Internet every day.

Many scholars have contended that the Internet has great democratic potential. Kedzie holds that the Internet differs from the previous technologies such as telegraph, radio, and television, whose attributes (e.g., low cost, geographic independence, and multi-directional capability) make it impossible for governments to keep communication borders closed.¹¹ Kedzie adds that the consequent free flow of information, particularly democratic information, enlightens people living in less democratic countries as to the comparatively comfortable lifestyles linked to democracies so that they could start to call for democratic change.¹² Similarly, Nisbet et al. declare that the Internet may promote political changes by adapting citizens to the political beliefs required for democratic citizenship, and in turn encourage sustainable democratic governance.¹³ Using macro-level panel data from 1994 to 2003, Groshek analyzes 152 countries and finds that increased internet diffusion likely led to democratic growth in countries in which democratic changes were underway.¹⁴ Moreover, Howard and Hussain claim that the Internet played a key role in the rise of democracy movements in the Middle East. They hold that “digital media helped to turn individualized, localized, and community-specific dissent into structured movements with a collective consciousness about both shared grievances and opportunities for action.”¹⁵ In a similar vein, Bhuiyan claims that social

¹¹ Christopher Kedzie, *Communication and Democracy: Coincident Revolutions and the Emergent Dictators Dilemma* (Santa Monica: Rand, 1997), 15.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Erik C. Nisbet, Elizabeth Stoycheff, and Katy E. Pearce, "Internet Use and Democratic Demands: A Multinational, Multilevel Model of Internet Use and Citizen Attitudes About Democracy," *Journal of Communication* 62, no. 2 (2012).

¹⁴ Jacob Groshek, "The Democratic Effects of the Internet, 1994—2003: A Cross-National Inquiry of 152 Countries," *International Communication Gazette* 71, no. 3 (2009).

¹⁵ Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain, "The Upheavals in Egypt and Tunisia: The Role of Digital Media," *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 3 (2011).

media in Egypt serves as a platform for sharing ideas, experiences, and knowledge, which helps to motivate individuals' desire for democracy and socioeconomic progress.¹⁶

Many other scholars, however, argue that internet technologies can empower authoritarian governments to maintain control of society. Lessig argues that authoritarian countries can use the Internet to strengthen the existent political system by controlling the underlying machine code and shaping legal circumstances for the Internet's operation.¹⁷ In a similar vein, Nisbet et al. claim that non-democratic regimes can maintain power by planning out the development of the Internet and stipulating how netizens use the Internet.¹⁸ Morozov declares that the Internet efficiently empowers authoritarian regimes because the Internet provides tools for them to track, infiltrate, and undermine collective action against governments.¹⁹ Further, Klyueva finds that the Russian government succeeds through the wide-ranging and covert control of the Internet in neutralizing online political participation.²⁰

As one of the most authoritarian regimes in the world, the Chinese government has striven to enhance its internet control since it began providing internet access service for society so as to cope with potential threats posed by internet development to its rule. It has set up a complex and powerful internet control regime.²¹ Deibert et al. claim that "the People's Republic of China was among the first to adopt national filtering systems at the backbone of the country's Internet—popularly known as the 'Great Firewall of China'—and it has

¹⁶ Serajul I. Bhuiyan, "Social Media and Its Effectiveness in the Political Reform Movement in Egypt," *Middle East Media Educator* 1, no. 1 (2011).

¹⁷ Lawrence Lessig, *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*, Code (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 4-10.

¹⁸ Nisbet, Stoycheff, and Pearce, "Internet Use and Democratic Demands: A Multinational, Multilevel Model of Internet Use and Citizen Attitudes About Democracy."

¹⁹ E. Morozov, *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World* (Penguin Books Limited, 2011), 85-90.

²⁰ Anna Klyueva, "Taming Online Political Engagement in Russia: Disempowered Publics, Empowered State and Challenges of the Fully Functioning Society," *International Journal Of Communication* 10 (2016).

²¹ Xueyang Xu, Z. Morley Mao, and J. Alex Halderman, "Internet Censorship in China: Where Does the Filtering Occur?," in *Passive and Active Measurement*, ed. Neil Spring and George F. Riley, Lecture Notes in Computer Science (Berlin: Springer, 2011), 133-42.

become a paradigm of internet censorship ever since.”²² They add that the Chinese government has put a great number of internet protocol (IP) addresses, keywords, and domains on its block lists to prevent people living in China from accessing information which the government deemed to be illegal and harmful.²³ Gomez points out that China’s internet control contains many different methods, including legislation to block sensitive content, the exertion of political control over internet service and content providers, and self-censorship.²⁴ MacKinnon maintains that in order to control information that the Chinese people can obtain as well as their online behavior, the Chinese government has employed a range of measures, including cyber-attacks, device and network controls, domain-name controls, localized disconnection and restriction, surveillance, and astroturfing and public outreach.²⁵ As a result, some scholars argue that the internet control regime in China is the most rigorous and sophisticated in the world.²⁶

However, online political protests took place time and time again in China during the past two decades. Guobing Yang, Professor of Communication and Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, argues that the Internet, which empowers citizens in resisting state oppression, has brought a new element into the realm of political contention.²⁷ He claims that although China’s internet control system is becoming more advanced, China’s Internet has been inundated with voices of dissent.²⁸ Popular protests about various

²² Ronald Deibert et al., *Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights, and Rule in Cyberspace* (MIT Press, 2010), 4.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ James Gomez, "Dumbing Down Democracy: Trends in Internet Regulation, Surveillance and Control in Asia," *Pacific Journalism Review* 10, no. 2 (2004).

²⁵ Rebecca MacKinnon, "Chinas "Networked Authoritarianism", " *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 2 (2011).

²⁶ Jongpil Chung, "Comparing Online Activities in China and South Korea: The Internet and the Political Regime," *Asian Survey* 48, no. 5 (2008); Steven Cherry, "The Net Effect: As Chinas Internet Gets a Much - Needed Makeover, Will the New Network Promote Freedom or Curtail It?," *Spectrum, IEEE* 42, no. 6 (2005).

²⁷ Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China : Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 3.

²⁸ Ibid., 213.

social problems, such as government land grabs,²⁹ environmental pollution, laid-off workers, and political corruption, take place time after time in China's cyberspace. Although Chinese authorities are highly evasive about the statistical data of online political protests, some information can still be obtained from research reports and independent investigations. For example, according to "Blue book of Public Opinion in China (2014)," the number of mass protests on the Internet increased from 12 in 2003 to 413 in 2013.³⁰

Online political protests can coexist with stringent government control of the Internet, but they have limited political impacts. This poses a puzzle that cannot be explained by existing studies. On the one hand, some studies have shown that authoritarian regimes are hostile to the activities of political dissidents. They imply that authoritarian countries cannot allow collective contentious action to occur frequently for a long period. Johnston suggests that authoritarian regimes always severely restrict democratic freedoms and wield violence and covert surveillance to prevent political dissent.³¹ Adopting a similar position, Vladislavljević argues that authoritarian states' political system is invariably closed, repressive, and unfavorable for organized political opposition.³² This view is supported by Lichbach, who points out that extensive state security apparatuses, strong ideological control, and the lack of autonomous social organization make the cost of holding collective dissent prohibitive.³³

²⁹ For more on China's land grabs, see Tao Ran, "China's Land Grab Is Undermining Grassroots Democracy," *The Guardian*, 2011, accessed 15 June, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/dec/16/china-land-grab-undermining-democracy>; Frank Langfitt, "Chinese Farmers Revolt against Government Land Grab," *NPR*, 2013, accessed 15 December, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/2013/03/05/173495434/chinese-farmers-fight-against-government-land-grab>.

³⁰ Guoming Yu, *Blue Book of Public Opinion in China (2014)* (Beijing: Peoples Daily Press, 2014).

³¹ Hank Johnston, "'The Game's Afoot' Social Movements in Authoritarian States," in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements*, ed. Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani (Oxford University Press, 2015), 41.

³² Nebojša Vladislavljević, "Popular Protest in Authoritarian Regimes: Evidence from Communist and Post-Communist States," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 14, no. 2 (2014).

³³ Mark I Lichbach, "Rethinking Rationality and Rebellion: Theories of Collective Action and Problems of Collective Dissent," *Rationality and Society* 6, no. 1 (1994).

In addition, several scholars contend that the Chinese government has succeeded through strict internet control in stifling political opposition and mobilization on the Internet. For example, Chung claim that Chinese internet users are afraid of expressing their true opinions about the party or government online and offline because of potential harsh punishment.³⁴ Zhen argues that China's internet control is a formidable barrier to collective dissent, with the result that "citizens have fundamentally become docile figures of society."³⁵ In a similar vein, Shen et al. claim that the practice of China's internet censorship can intimidate internet users into self-censorship, the result of which can make people become indifference towards online acts of protest.³⁶ According to MacKinnon, while encouraging the growth of the Internet as a tool for commercial activities, entertainment, and education, the Chinese government has succeeded through censorship in restraining people from using the Internet to mobilize any type of viable dissenting movements.³⁷

On the other hand, many scholars and observers are optimistic about the potential of online political protests to promote fundamental political changes in China. Much research examined the ways in which the internet served as a democratizing tool for Chinese users to express their opinions and challenge the authoritarian regime. For example, Bi believes that internet users were able to challenge the communist regime and argues that "cyberspace has already become one more arena for information exchange, the expression of dissent, and social organization. If the internet increasingly dominates the social scene in China, then, looking to the future, the freedom of association it gives

³⁴ Chung, "Comparing Online Activities in China and South Korea: The Internet and the Political Regime."

³⁵ Simon K Zhen, "An Explanation of Self-Censorship in China: The Enforcement of Social Control through a Panoptic Infrastructure," *Inquiries Journal/Student Pulse* 7, no. 9 (2015).

³⁶ Fei Shen et al., "Online Network Size, Efficacy, and Opinion Expression: Assessing the Impacts of Internet Use in China," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 21, no. 4 (2009).

³⁷ Rebecca MacKinnon, "Flatter World and Thicker Walls? Blogs, Censorship and Civic Discourse in China," *Public choice* 134, no. 1-2 (2008).

to the fast-growing number of users will bring about major changes in China.”³⁸ Similarly, in 2002, Michael Chase and James Mulvenon, two scholars at RAND, argued that the advent of the Internet in China had changed the dynamics between the communist regime and the dissident community.³⁹ They implied that the Internet enabled Chinese dissidents to disseminate uncensored information rapidly and organize protests easily, so that the political use of the Internet by Chinese dissidents would produce a dramatic political transformation.⁴⁰

Since 2009, social media, especially Sina Weibo, has become the main battlefield for ordinary netizens to fight against political oppression and present demands upon authorities. Many scholars and observers argue that the proliferation of popular protests on social media can lead to a broader political change in China. For instance, Yan Xiaofeng, the chief editor of New Weekly (新周刊),⁴¹ maintains that online protest has become a new way of civic engagement and is significantly changing social and political life in China.⁴² In a similar vein, Teng claims that social media in China are “enriching the modalities of activity in the rights defense movement, enhancing the mobilization capacity of activists, and accelerating the systematization of popular rights defense, thereby profoundly affecting China’s ongoing political transformation.”⁴³ It has been over 10 years since scholars and observers argued that online political protests would produce fundamental changes to China’s political system. However, China is still an authoritarian state with the deteriorating human rights situation and expanding online

³⁸ Jianhai Bi, "The Internet Revolution in China: The Significance for Traditional Forms of Communist Control," *International Journal* 56, no. 3 (2001).

³⁹ Michael S. Chase and James C. Mulvenon, *Youve Got Dissent! Chinese Dissident Use of the Internet and Beijings Counter -Strategies* (RAND Corporation, 2002), 15-32.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ New Weekly is one of top 10 most popular magazines in China. For more information, see <http://www.newweekly.com.cn>.

⁴² Xiaofeng Yan, "一次微博事件的路径分析 [Path Analysis of a Weibo Event]," *Youth Journalist*, no. 31 (2010).

⁴³ Teng Biao, "Rights Defence (Weiquan), Microblogs (Weibo), and the Surrounding Gaze (Weiguan): The Rights Defence Movement Online and Offline," *China Perspectives*, no. 3 (2012).

surveillance. Despite growing online political protests, there is no indication that substantive political changes have taken place in China and it is moving in a more democratic direction.

While providing important insights into China's online political protests, the above studies fail to explain why online political protests take place frequently in China and why their impacts on China's political changes are limited. The remaining part of this chapter is subdivided into four sections. Section 1.2 presents a detailed review of literature that covers existing studies about the emergence and end of China's online political protests. Section 1.3 presents the main argument of the thesis, and section 1.4 is concerned with the methodology for this thesis. Finally, section 1.5 outlines the structure of this thesis.

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Political Protest and Online Political Protest

This section commences with making a critical analysis of existing definitions of political participation, political protest, and online political protest in the literature, which are often used in different and often ambiguous ways. This section then provides a definition of online political protest used in this thesis, which includes a broad range of phenomena. Before defining the concept of protest, the thesis will discuss the concept of political participation because there are strong ties between the two. Political participation is a multi-dimensional concept and "a central concept in both the theoretical and empirical study of politics."⁴⁴ Verba and Nie first conceptualized political participation in 1972. They define political participation as "those activities by private citizens that are more or

⁴⁴ Vernon. Bogdanor, *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Political Institutions* (Blackwell Reference, 1987), 55-67.

less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take.”⁴⁵ The definition of Verba and Nie has exerted an enormous influence on the subsequent literature about political participation. Huntington and Nelson define political participation as “an activity by private citizens designed to influence government decision-making.”⁴⁶ In a similar vein, Bennett and Bennett define political participation as “those present or past activities by private citizens and private or public organizations and groups, that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental structures and personnel, and the actions they take or do not take.”⁴⁷ In general, the above definitions indicate that private citizens are primary participants, and the government is the target that political participation is designed to influence.

Other scholars have emphasized approaches to political participation. Diemer defines political participation as an “engagement with traditional mechanisms in [...] the political system, such as voting in elections and joining political organizations.”⁴⁸ Vissers and Stolle, however, define political participation as “all forms of involvement in which citizens express their political opinion and/or convey that opinion to political decision-makers.”⁴⁹ Vissers and Stolle’s definition implies that political participation contains both conventional (institutional) and non-conventional (non-institutional) political activities.

In brief, the concept of political participation generally contains three main elements:

⁴⁵ S. Verba and N.H. Nie, *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality* (Harper & Row, 1972), 2.

⁴⁶ Samuel P. Huntington and Joan M. Nelson, *No Easy Choice : Political Participation in Developing Countries* (Cambridge, Mass. [u.a.] : Harvard Univ. Press, 1976), 3.

⁴⁷ Stephen Earl Bennett and Linda L. M. Bennett, "Political Participation," *Annual Review of Sociology* (1986).

⁴⁸ Matthew A. Diemer, "Fostering Marginalized Youths' Political Participation: Longitudinal Roles of Parental Political Socialization and Youth Sociopolitical Development," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 50, no. 1-2 (2012).

⁴⁹ Sara Vissers and Dietlind Stolle, "The Internet and New Modes of Political Participation: Online Versus Offline Participation," *Information, Communication & Society* 17, no. 8 (2013).

major participants, targets that participants support or oppose, and approaches used by participants to take part in political activity. According to the above definition, the major participants are individuals in their capacity as private citizens to participate in politics.⁵⁰ The targets of political participation are mostly confined to government authorities and officials.⁵¹ Conge argues that “if activity is not focused upon national or local state structures, authorities, and/or allocative decisions regarding public goods, then it is not political participation.”⁵² In other words, according to this view, political participation should be activities aiming at influencing governmental decision-making.⁵³ When it comes to approaches to participation, political participation contains “institutional” and “non-institutional” political action.⁵⁴ Institutional political participation includes acts that use the institutional channels of representative government, such as voting in elections, volunteering for a political campaign, and making a campaign donation. By contrast, non-institutional political participation refers to those activities that challenge the traditional channels of participation, including petitions, boycotts, sit-ins, strikes, and peaceful demonstrations.

Political protest is one type of political participation activity. Keren claims that political protest refers to efforts made by individuals or groups to remedy or prevent perceived

⁵⁰ Huntington and Nelson, *No Easy Choice : Political Participation in Developing Countries*; Vissers and Stolle, "The Internet and New Modes of Political Participation: Online Versus Offline Participation."; Robert R. Alford and Roger Friedland, "Political Participation and Public Policy," *Annual Review of Sociology* 1, no. 1 (1975).

⁵¹ J.M. Nelson, *Access to Power: Politics and the Urban Poor in Developing Nations* (Princeton University Press, 1979); S. Verba and N.H. Nie, "Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality," (University of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁵² Patrick J. Conge, "The Concept of Political Participation: Toward a Definition," *Comparative Politics* 20, no. 2 (1988).

⁵³ Nelson, *Access to Power: Politics and the Urban Poor in Developing Nations*; Huntington and Nelson, *No Easy Choice : Political Participation in Developing Countries*; Verba and Nie, "Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality."

⁵⁴ Conge, "The Concept of Political Participation: Toward a Definition."; Samuel Henry Barnes and Max Kaase, *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1979); Huntington and Nelson, *No Easy Choice : Political Participation in Developing Countries*.

injustices inside a political system.⁵⁵ Lipsky argues that the political protest is “a mode of political action oriented toward objection to one or more policies or conditions, characterized by showmanship or display of an unconventional nature, and undertaken to obtain rewards from political or economic systems while working within the system.”⁵⁶ Quaranta claims that political protest goes beyond the range of institutional participation, and it does not obey the rules of electoral politics.⁵⁷ Supporting this view, Marsh and Kaase contend that political protest is “a means of political repress, namely [...] the use of tactics as petitions, demonstrations, boycotts, rent or tax strikes, unofficial industrial strikes, occupations of buildings, blocking of traffic, damage to property, and personal violence.”⁵⁸ In brief, according to these studies, political protest is a kind of non-institutional political participation, referring to acts of criticizing, challenging, or making demands on government authorities. Its major participants are confined to private citizens; also, the targets of political protest focus on government policies and officials. This is the definition of political protest used for this thesis.

When protesters transfer from the offline world to cyberspace, a new form of political protest appears. Scholars have coined various terms to describe this social phenomenon, such as “cyber-activism,”⁵⁹ “cloud protesting,”⁶⁰ “e-movements,”⁶¹ “connective

⁵⁵ Michael Keren, "Political Protest," in *Governments of the World: A Global Guide to Citizens Rights and Responsibilities*, ed. Chester Neal Tate (Macmillan Reference USA/Thomson Gale, 2006), 303.

⁵⁶ Michael Lipsky, "Protest as a Political Resource," *American Political Science Review* 62, no. 04 (1968).

⁵⁷ M. Quaranta, *Political Protest in Western Europe: Exploring the Role of Context in Political Action* (Springer International Publishing, 2015), 22-24.

⁵⁸ Alan Marsh and Max Kaase, "Measuring Political Action," in *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies*, ed. Samuel Henry Barnes and Max Kaase (Sage Publications, 1979), 57-59.

⁵⁹ Martha Mccaughey and Michael d. Ayers, *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice* (Taylor & Francis, 2013).

⁶⁰ Stefania Milan, "From Social Movements to Cloud Protesting: The Evolution of Collective Identity," *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 8 (2015).

⁶¹ Jennifer Earl and Kimport Kimport, *Digitally Enabled Social Change: Activism in the Internet Age* (MIT Press, 2011).

action,”⁶² “Internet activism,”⁶³ and “logic of aggregation.”⁶⁴ For example, Milan explains that:

Contemporary [online political] protest is best described as a cloud where a set of ingredients enabling mobilization to coexist: identities, narratives, frames and meanings, know-how, and other “soft” resources. They are fundamentally different from the “old” pre-packaged ideals and beliefs soaked in ideology, because they can be customized by and for individuals. Resources are in the cloud to be shared in a ‘pick and choose’ fashion, allowing each individual to tailor his or her participation. Anyone can join anytime; one can bring along his or her identity, cultural and political background, grievances and claims, and even groups of friends. Anyone fits in the broad narrative of the cloud, anyone can contribute. Identities, resources, narratives are negotiated on and offline, but they mostly “live” online. They are mediated by the web interface offered by commercial social media.⁶⁵

In addition, scholars have classified protests in cyberspace according to the degree of reliance on the Internet. For instance, Vegh states that there are two types of cyber-protests—internet-enhanced and internet-based protests, and he explains that:

In the former case (internet-enhanced protests), the Internet is only used to enhance the traditional advocacy techniques, for example, as an additional communication channel, by raising awareness beyond the scope possible before the Internet, or by coordinating action more efficiently. In the latter case, the Internet is used for

⁶² W.Lance. Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁶³ Guobin Yang, "Online Activism," *Journal of Democracy* 20, no. 3 (2009).

⁶⁴ Jeffrey S. Juris, "Reflections on #Occupy Everywhere: Social Media, Public Space, and Emerging Logics of Aggregation," *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 2 (2012).

⁶⁵ Irene Poetranto, "Cloud Protesting: Dissent in Times of Social Media," *The Citizen Club*, updated 18 October, 2011, accessed Nov 6, 2017, <https://citizenlab.ca/2011/10/cloud-protesting-dissent-in-times-of-social-media/>.

activities that are only possible online, like a virtual sit-in or hacking into target Web sites.⁶⁶

In a similar vein, Yang divided online protests into two types: internet-assisted contention and internet contention.⁶⁷ internet-assisted contention refers to protests which initially occur in the real world, and then protesters employed the Internet as a tool for diffusing information and mobilizing support; by contrast, internet contention is protests which take place solely online, and may or may not extend to offline society.⁶⁸

In China, a number of scholars have described online political protests as “online mass incident (网络群体事件).”⁶⁹ “Mass incident” is a China-specific term. It was first used as a political term in China’s official documents, which had a pre-set political standpoint that considered mass incidents as serious harm to society.⁷⁰ With the growing understanding of mass incidents, many Chinese scholars have gradually abandoned the official political standpoint and have tended to be neutral and rational.⁷¹ For example, Liu and Liu use “network group event” to describe the social phenomenon and defines it as “the communication process of the Internet users’ group around a theme, for the common good or other related purposes, spontaneous or organized aggregating on the

⁶⁶ Sandor Vegh, "Classifying Forms of Online Activism: Cyberprotests against the World Bank," in *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice*, ed. Martha Mccaughey and Michael d. Ayers (Taylor & Francis, 2013), 71-72.

⁶⁷ Guobin Yang, "Contention in Cyberspace," *Popular protest in China* (2008).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Wanjing Zhu, "An Interpretation of the Political Process of Online Group Events," *Journal of Northeastern University (Social Science)* 16, no. 5 (2014). Maria Bondes and Günter Schucher, "Derailed Emotions: The Transformation of Claims and Targets During the Wenzhou Online Incident," *Information, Communication & Society* 17, no. 1 (2014). Xiameng Si, Hui Cheng, and Yanchao Zhang, "An Opinion Dynamics Model for Online Mass Incident" paper presented at the 3rd International Conference on Advanced Computer Theory and Engineering, 2010.

⁷⁰ Jianrong Yu, "当前我国群体性事件的主要类型及其基本特征 [the Main Types and Basic Characteristics of Mass Incidents in China]," *Journal of CUPL*, no. 6 (2009).

⁷¹ Yan Sui and Weishan Miao, "中国网络群体事件的主要特征和研究框架 [the Main Characteristics and Research Framework of Chinas Online Mass Incident]," *Modern Communication* 36, no. 11 (2014).

Internet, creating public opinion, and triggering social action.”⁷² Jiang adopts “Internet event” to replace “online mass incident” and defines it as “public events where large numbers of netizens participate in often unorganized, autonomous online efforts to express their sentiments and opinions, address collective needs, or influence public opinion and policy.”⁷³

The thesis defines the online political protest as a kind of internet-based collective action that aims to criticize, challenge, or make demands on government authorities. This definition has three primary connotations. First, the online political protest is a kind of collective action that involves many participants.⁷⁴ Participants are private citizens who mount joint action during a certain period. Second, online political protests target government decisions or officials. Third, online political protests do not contain protests that take place in the offline world and then use the Internet as a tool for mobilization. In other words, this thesis does not make use of internet-enhanced protest or internet-assisted contention as part of the definition of the online political protest. This is because internet-enhanced or internet-assisted protests are largely traditional collective action, which represent offline interactions between the state and society. The main sites where they occur are the offline world, such as streets and squares, and they simply attempt to use the internet to increase the influence of the collective action. By contrast, the main site in which online political protest takes place is the virtual world, that is cyberspace, although it may extend to the offline world. Online protesters depend principally on social networks on the Internet to share resources and interact with each other.

⁷² Hongqin Liu and Qiang Liu, "Network Group Events: New Form of Public Emergency," *Scientific Research* (2010).

⁷³ Min Jiang, "Internet Events," in *The Internet in China, Cultural, Political, and Social Dimensions (1980s-2000s)* (Berkshire, 2014), 211-18.

⁷⁴ “Many participants” means that information about the online political protest can appear at least once on Sina Weibo’s list of “Hot Search” (微博热搜排行榜).

1.2.1 Existing Explanations for China's Online Political Protest

There is no generally accepted explanation of the occurrence and development of online political protests in China. However, there are three main explanations. To begin with, some scholars suggest the Internet's technical characteristics make the Chinese government incapable of preventing online political protests. Second, many scholars argue that the government's limited capability in internet control does not result from technical problems, and they focus on contradictions within China's internet control institutions to explain online political protests. Third, several studies, focusing on online protesters' psychological state, consider China's online political protests as a means of venting feelings of anger and hatred. In fact, scholars' disagreements and debates reflect the immense complexity of this research problem. The following paragraphs will introduce existing explanations and examine their limitations.

First of all, some studies focus on the technical characteristics of the Internet. They suggest that features of the Internet have presented considerable difficulties for China's internet regulators so that they are incapable of preventing online political protests. Zhou and Shen argue that the inherent features of the Internet, such as openness, equality, interactivity, no geographical restriction, and multi-information, make it hard for the Chinese government to prevent online political protest.⁷⁵ Supporting this view, Gui and Wang point out that "virtual contact" created by the Internet brings down the organizing costs; besides, the Internet's information accessibility strengthens the rebellious spirit of the Chinese.⁷⁶ Also, by examining the relationship between the Internet and civil society, Xiong argues that the Internet's openness, interactivity, and virtuality contribute to the formation of online public sphere, which creates conditions for internet political

⁷⁵ Wei Zhou and Yongfeng Shen, "论互联网对公民非制度化参与的影响及对策 [the Influence of the Internet on Civic Non-Institutional Political Participation and Measures against It]," *Hubei Social Sciences* 1 (2006).

⁷⁶ Yong Gui and Zhengfen Wang, "互联网对中国集体行动的影响 [the Influence of the Internet on China's Collective Action]," *Journalism Review* 4 (2014).

protests.⁷⁷ In online public sphere, anonymity encourages individuals to voice their dissent from the government's decision.⁷⁸ In a similar vein, Tai states that the Internet has empowered China's netizens in the following ways: first, the Internet along with other information and communications technology (ICT) products have created a brand new space of public communication and discourse; second, it has served as a huge gathering place for activists not only to share information but also to exchange opinions and plan action.⁷⁹

Moreover, Lacharite contends that counter-filtering technologies, including anti-blocking software and anonymous e-mail services, render China's internet control ineffective and unworkable in practice.⁸⁰ Supporting this view, Xiao argues that the networked, decentralized, and ephemeral nature of the Internet makes Chinese authorities' efforts to control the internet unavailing.⁸¹ He explains that:

New-generation technologies such as peer-to-peer file sharing and voice over IP phones (Skype is a brilliant example), will provide new communication platforms that can make it easier for users to bypass the censors' control. The capacity of the government to implement these new regulations effectively, therefore, is very questionable. The many-to-many and emergent nature of the Internet empowers information users far more than censors.⁸²

The above studies provide valuable insights into how the Internet's technical characteristics result in the Chinese government's inability to prevent online political

⁷⁷ Guangqing Xiong, "中国网络公共领域的兴起、特征与前景 [the Rise, Characteristics, and Prospects of Public Sphere in China]," *Teaching and Research*, no. 1 (2011).

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Zixue Tai, *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society* (Taylor & Francis, 2007).

⁸⁰ Jason Lacharite, "Electronic Decentralisation in China: A Critical Analysis of Internet Filtering Policies in the Peoples Republic of China," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 37, no. 2 (2002).

⁸¹ Qiang Xiao, "Chinas Internet Censors Fight a Losing Battle," *The Wall Street Journal*, 2005, accessed 5 December, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB112804563897456488>.

⁸² Ibid.

protests. However, these studies fail to explain why online political protests tend to be quickly put down by the government rather than achieving their desired outcomes. In effect, they underestimate the possibility that the Internet can also empower the state. Not only can online activists make use of internet technologies, but the Chinese government can also employ them to enhance internet control. It is likely that internet technologies can be used to maintain undemocratic regimes.⁸³ Even if internet censorship is ineffective in stopping online political protests, the government can directly shut down websites and suspend the country's internet service for individuals. According to a report given by the New York Times, China's internet regulators, on 3 August 2017, tested a single-click method of closing websites and isolating Chinese internet users from the rest of the world.⁸⁴ Actually, the reason why the Chinese government does not cut off the country's internet service is not because of technical difficulties but due to other considerations, such as economic development and international reputation. Generally speaking, explanations based on the Internet's technical features are oversimplified. They tend to "draw a simple line between technology and society, omitting all the rich human experiences and institutions in between."⁸⁵

Secondly, several scholars do not support the view that China's ineffective internet control results from technical problems, and they focus on contradictions within China's internet control institutions to explain online political protests. After exploring the strategic interaction between the state and society in cyberspace, Zheng argues that China's internet control system is advanced and complicated, but the system cannot always enable the Chinese government to control the internet effectively, and he identifies three main factors

⁸³ Bruce Bimber, *Information and American Democracy: Technology in the Evolution of Political Power* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 89-99; Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas, *Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule* (Brookings Institution Press, 2010), 3-5.

⁸⁴ Paul Mozur, "China's Internet Censors Play a Tougher Game of Cat and Mouse," *The New York Times*, 2017, accessed October 29, 2017, <https://cn.nytimes.com/business/20170804/china-internet-censorship/en-us/>.

⁸⁵ Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China : Citizen Activism Online*.

causing damage to the Chinese government's capability of controlling the Internet.⁸⁶ First, Chinese internet users are highly sophisticated and can find new methods to circumvent internet censorship. Second, internet regulators often do not strictly enforce internet laws and regulations. He explains that:

An effective control regime by design can be ineffective in reality simply because rules and regulations made by the control regime are frequently not enforced. China does not have a tradition of rule of law, and it has not been able to construct an effective infrastructure to enforce laws and regulations. The government makes laws and regulations but often finds it difficult to enforce them. This is also true in the case of the Internet.⁸⁷

Third, conflicts of interest within the Chinese government lead to the poor practice of internet control. He contends that:

There are conflicting interests between the regulatory regime and the control regime. The highest priority of the regulatory regimes is to promote internet development, while the control regime's priority is to limit the political impact of the Internet. It is not so easy to tell which interest will prevail in reality—the commercial interests of the regulatory regime or the political interests of the control regime.⁸⁸

Except for ineffective internet control, Zheng goes further and points out that the Internet has made it possible for a social group to develop social capital and has facilitated internet-based collective action.⁸⁹ He explains that:

⁸⁶ Yongnian Zheng, *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State, and Society in China* (Stanford University Press, 2007), 64-69.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 68.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 69.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 104.

While low information cost matters in providing incentives for participants, social capital, or what Tarrow called “shared understanding and identities,” is even more important in coordinating collective actions. With such shared understanding and identities, collective actions tend to be motivated by what Dennis Chong called the “public spirit.” It is reasonable to assume that the public spirit directed against the authoritarian regime exists in China.⁹⁰

In other words, Zheng regards social capital as shared understanding and identities. Only when individuals have such shared understand and identities can they be mobilized by the public spirit to participate in internet-based collective action. To summarize, Zheng argues that sophisticated Chinese internet users, the poor practice of internet control, available social capital (shared understanding and identities), and public spirit contribute to the emergence of China’s online political protests.

Zheng’s study makes an important contribution to advancing the understanding of China’s online political protests. However, there are some limitations of Zheng’s research. First, following Zheng’s logic, it seems that the Chinese government cannot put a stop to an online political protest unless it gives in to the demands of protesters. This because when the government attempts to discontinue an internet-based protest, these internet users are still very sophisticated, social capital and public spirit remain available, and conflicting interests between the regulatory regime and the control regime still exist. Therefore, online protesters can continue to get around internet censorship to organize protests until they achieve their goals. Second, Zheng does not explain why internet users having shared understanding and identities can be mobilized by the public spirit. The causal relationship between the two is elusive. Finally, Zheng assumes that there is public spirit directed

⁹⁰ Ibid., 106.

against the Chinese government. However, he does not provide evidence of the existence of public spirit in China.

Yang contends that China's internet control cannot stop online protests from happening and that "the existence of official institutions for public input and the segmentation of the Chinese state together create political opportunities for popular protests."⁹¹ He explains that:

Over the past decade, an Internet-control regime that combines legal, administrative, and technological means to limit online free speech has formed in China. An architecture of control built on code was born alongside a new architecture of political institutions. This control regime, however, is torn by the internal contradictions between the priorities of economic development and ideological control. In addition, popular demands for government transparency, accountability, and citizens' rights to know act as countercurrents against control. Finally, Chinese Internet users and activists are skilled social actors. They have developed creative ways of negotiating and fighting Internet control.⁹²

In brief, Yang argues that contradictions within China's internet control institutions, along with culture, business interests, the force of civil society, and transnationalism, have undermined China's internet control regime.⁹³ While Yang's study offers important insights into China's rising online political protests, it does not examine the failure of these protests to bring about political changes.

Third, there are also some studies focusing on participants' mental state, especially grievance and resentment, and considering online political protests to be a type of social

⁹¹ Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China : Citizen Activism Online*, 47.

⁹² Ibid., 62.

⁹³ Ibid.

anomie caused by the collapse of social structures. For example, Tan, Li, and Mao argue that participants' sentiment and opinions play a key role in facilitating the emergence and development of China's online protests.⁹⁴ Shi declares that online political protests are the result of Chinese people's long-term social discontent, which is caused by various social issues, including wealth inequality, environmental pollution, unemployment.⁹⁵ He adds that most online protesters do not have direct conflicting interests with the government, but they use online political protests as a way to provide relief from anger and suffering and to compel the government to make responses.⁹⁶ Shi's view is supported by Zhu, who argues that structural incentives, resentment, and discourse influence and determine online protest emergence and development in China.⁹⁷ She argues that resentment relates to feelings of deprivation, pressure, and dissatisfaction, and discourse refers to generalized belief. Structure incentives, as the starting point, lead to resentment and discourse under different circumstances, and then the interaction of the resentment and discourse results in the occurrence of online collective action.⁹⁸ Du and Wei declare that the essence of China's online political protests is the spirit of resistance.⁹⁹ They claim that when China's internet users find that a government official who commits violations against the moral rules, social conventions, and the law does not get the

⁹⁴ Zhangwen Tan, Xiaochen Li, and Wenji Mao, "Agent-Based Modeling of Netizen Groups in Chinese Internet Events," *Intelligence and Security Informatics* (2011).

⁹⁵ Zengzhi Shi, "沟通与对话:公民社会与媒体公共空间—网络群体性事件形成机制的理论基础 [Communication and Dialogue: Civil Society and Media Public Space-the Theoretical Foundation of Internet Mass Protests Mechanism]," *Chinese Journal of Journalism & Communication* 12 (2009).

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Zhiling Zhu, "结构、怨恨和话语:无直接利益冲突的宏观条件形成机制研究—基于斯梅尔塞加值理论的思考 [Structure, Resentment and Discourse: Study on the Formation Mechanism of Macro Conditions of Indirect Interests Conflict - Thinking of Smelser' s Value-Added Model]," *Journal of Central South University (Social science)* 19, no. 3 (2013).

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Junfei Du and Juan Wei, "网络集群的政治社会学:本质、类型与效用 [the Political Sociology of Internet Collective Behavior:Essence,Type and Utility]," *Journal of Southeast University(Philosophy and Social Science)* 1 (2010).

punishment he/she deserves, they will autonomously participate in online protests to bring the official to justice.¹⁰⁰

Similarly, as argued by Xie, “emotions plays a decisive role in the course of cyberspace political contentious mobilization.”¹⁰¹ He argues that from the individual aspect, emotional stimulation resulting from a breaking event determines the ways in which internet users perceive the event and consequently affects the formation of public discourse and social identity; from the social aspect, online protesters’ emotional responses are rooted in specific sociocultural backgrounds, which determine the model of online political mobilization.¹⁰²

The above studies provide insightful analyses of how people’s destructive emotions contribute to China’s online political protests. However, they have a major limitation. These studies have an underlying assumption that people who participate in online political protests are irrational. Therefore, individuals’ disruptive psychological state plays a decisive role in encouraging them to engage in online political protests. The assumption that online protesters are a crowd of irrational and sentimental netizens is questionable. These studies fail to explain that many individuals are likely to stop their acts of protest and lapse into silence when the government increases punishment. In fact, it is hard to say if participants are irrational or rational. Both rationality and emotions have important roles in giving rise to individuals’ acts of protest, and they are an indivisible whole. Therefore, online protesters’ emotions are not enough to explain the occurrence and end of online political protests.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Jinlin Xie, “情感与网络抗争动员—基于湖北“石首事件”的个案分析 [Emotion and Contentious Mobilization in Cyberspace -a Case Study Based on "Shishou Event" of Hubei Province],” *Journal of Public Management* 9, no. 1 (2012).

¹⁰² Ibid.

Apart from the above three main types of explanations, Cairns holds that the surge of China's online political protests is not the consequence of the incapable internet control. He argues that the Chinese government has adjusted to changeable internet ecology and efficiently used internet censorship to manipulate dissidents and protest movements.¹⁰³ The Chinese government has sophisticated censorship capabilities, and those seemingly accidental online political protests are actually planned by Chinese leaders because its internet regulation system can selectively tighten or loosen the control of the Internet according to top leaders' instructions.¹⁰⁴ Cairns argues that "once an incident breaks on social media and draws senior officials' attention, they know they have to quickly size up the situation and either order increased censorship, or deliberately let discussion proceed."¹⁰⁵ He adds that China's top leaders are rational, and decisions on whether to increase censorship of an online breaking incident are determined by the leadership's cost-benefit calculations.¹⁰⁶

Moreover, according to Cairns, there are four key factors affecting leaders' trade-off between strict censorship and loose censorship, including responsiveness benefit, image harm, collective action risk, and visible censorship cost.¹⁰⁷ As Cairns argues:

Leaders must balance this responsiveness benefit against three other variables: the image harm to leaders' reputations from allowing opposition speech online, the collective action risk of not blocking social media, and the visible censorship cost to leaders if censorship attempts are too obvious.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Christopher Marty Cairns, "Chinas Weibo Experiment: Social Media (Non-) Censorship and Autocratic Responsiveness" (Dissertation or Thesis, Cornell University, 2017).

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 62.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 32-37.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 3-4.

According to Cairns, responsiveness benefit and image harm mean that “allowing limited online criticism can signal regime responsiveness to public demands on issues where leaders’ legitimacy is at stake,” but allowing online opposition speech is likely to cause image harm to reputations of leaders.¹⁰⁹ Regarding the collective action risk, he suggests that many online dissenting voices have apparent potential to trigger collective action, which poses a threat to political stability. When it comes to the visible censorship cost, he maintains that if internet censorship is too obvious, it will trigger negative effects, “which can both make subsequent efforts at censorship more difficult, and negatively influence citizen perceptions of government capacity and honesty, since bloggers think leaders are trying to cover up a severe problem.”¹¹⁰

In addition, Cairns stresses that a powerful internet regulatory body is necessary for the government to implement a selective censorship strategy effectively. He argues that, to a large extent, Chinese leaders have overcome the fragmentation of authority in the internet sector after Xi Jinping came to power. They updated the Internet Affairs Bureau (互联网事务局) of the State Council Information Office (SCIO, 国务院新闻办) to the State Internet Information Office (国家互联网办公室) on May 2011, and then they succeeded in creating a unitary, top-down censoring bureaucracy by the establishment of the Central Leading Group for Cybersecurity and Informatization (中央网络安全和信息化领导小组) and the Cyberspace Administration of China (中央网络安全和信息化领导小组办公室) in February 2014.¹¹¹

While the study of Cairns is useful to understand the occurrence and end of online political protests, there are some problems with his explanation. First, there is a key assumption in his explanation that leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) are rational and China’s online political protests are the results of their deliberate decisions.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 60-61.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 67.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 117-24.

Cairns contents that four factors—responsiveness benefit, image harm, collective action risk, and visible censorship cost—interact to influence top Chinese leaders’ specific decisions regarding the enforcement of internet censorship; also, the four factors are “dynamic and variable both over time, and within various sentiment categories that rise and fall during a given online episode.”¹¹² In other words, Chinese leaders’ decisions on how to implement internet control of breaking incidents depend on four continuously changing factors. However, Cairns does not specify who Chinese leaders are. They may be members of the Politburo Standing Committee, politburo-level officials, or the members of Central Cyber Security and Informatization Leading Group. It is almost impossible for these leaders to keep track of the progress of breaking incidents and work together to make real-time instructions for them. Moreover, even if members of the Politburo Standing Committee directly manipulate China’s internet control, it is still impossible for them to continuously make rapid responses to every online breaking incident because of the factionalism in China’s leadership politics. Factional struggles may influence the leadership’s cost-benefit calculations so that the decision-making is likely to be a long, slow process.

Second, it is questionable whether the Xi Jinping administration has a unitary, top-down bureaucracy, which can implement selective internet control efficiently. In other words, it is debatable whether the establishment of the Central Leading Group for Cybersecurity and Informatization and the Cyberspace Administration of China has dealt effectively with the fragmentation of authority in China’s internet regulation. Chapter 4 demonstrates that the fragmented authority remains a serious problem and bureaucratic turf wars continue unabated. More significantly, the Central Leading Group was established after Xi Jinping rose to power. Cairns fails to explain the emergence and end of online political protests before Xi assumed power.

¹¹² Ibid., 68.

In summary, this review of the related literature shows various views in the existing researches on China's online political protest. Although existing explanations offer insight into China's online political protests, they have not provided a comprehensive understanding of the occurrence and development of these protests and failed to explain why their impacts on political changes are limited. In effect, internet technologies, contradictions in the Chinese polity, individuals' emotions are all factors in affecting online political protests. Therefore, a comprehensive study that brings these elements together to examine China's online political protest and its potential for China's political changes is still needed.

1.3 Main Argument of This Thesis

This thesis develops an alternative approach to examine the cause of China's online political protests and its impacts on China's political changes. The thesis employs the Political Opportunity Structure theory to explain the core question of the thesis. The political opportunity structure refers to environmental variables that give incentives for individuals to participate in collective action.¹¹³ This thesis argues that political opportunity structures, which consist of four key elements—elite divisions, internet control, online social networks, and influential allies,¹¹⁴ determine the occurrence and development of online political protests. While the existence of elite divisions, capricious internet control, extensive online social networks, and the active role of influential allies cause online political protests, the disappearance of some elements will damage political opportunity structures for online political protests, thereby leading to their end.

¹¹³ Peter K. Eisinger, "The Conditions of Protest Behavior in American Cities," *The American Political Science Review* 67, no. 1 (1973); Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, Third ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 160-63; Karl-Dieter Opp, *Theories of Political Protest and Social Movements: A Multidisciplinary Introduction, Critique, and Synthesis* (Routledge, 2009), 167-72. Chapter 2 will discuss the definition of the political opportunity structure in detail.

¹¹⁴ Based on previous research on the political opportunity structure theory and existing literature about political contention in Chinese cyberspace, the thesis identifies the four major elements of the political opportunity structure in relation to China's online political protests. Chapter 2 will explain them in detail.

The above argument is spelled out as follows. Firstly, elite divisions within the party-state have important roles in facilitating China's online political protests. Elite divisions imply that disagreements among China's political elites may arise about how to handle a given political issue. Elite divisions between the central and local governments as well as those within the central government are vital for netizens to stage online political protests in China.¹¹⁵ These divisions open possibilities for online activists to seek support and protection from central government agencies and even China's top leadership when staging online collective action.

Secondly, China's internet control tends to be capricious and incoherent, which makes it possible to stage online political protests in China. The Chinese party-state has established a complex and strict internet regulation regime to restrict internet access, filter out online information, enhance self-censorship, and manipulate online public opinion. Nevertheless, the highly sophisticated internet regulation regime does not necessarily ensure the effective implementation of internet control. In practice, the commercial interests of China's internet content providers (ICPs) and contradictions among China's internet regulatory agencies often cause internet control to often change. China's popular websites are in fierce competition with each other for limited internet users. To boost web traffic and attract users, they are not willing to apply rigorous standards of self-censorship to ban or censor their users. In other words, they are not entirely loyal to the Chinese government. Additionally, China's internet regulatory agencies have overlapping functional responsibilities and conflicting bureaucratic interests. Some of them lay more emphasis on the internet industry's growth; however, others pay more attention to ideological control in China's cyberspace. As a result, internet regulators often cannot quickly launch a coordinated effort to cope with breaking internet incidents.

¹¹⁵ Elite divisions also exist inside local governments, but they do not play an essential role in China's online political protests. More discussions of China's elite divisions are provided in Chapter 2.

Thirdly, online social networks have created a favorable environment for China's online political protests. Online social networks have brought down online protesters' costs incurred in diffusing information to a large audience to an almost negligible level. In addition, online social networks enable online protesters to rapidly publicize information without striving to attract traditional media's coverage. More significantly, online social networks make it possible for atomized online protesters with similar values, interests, and economic bases to establish links with each other rapidly and interact closely. Good communication and constant interaction can contribute to a shared understanding of the issues at stake and speed up the establishment of collective identity. Consequently, online protesters are able to form coherent groups to protest against the government.

Finally, influential allies, including many internet celebrities as well as social and commercial organizations, have an essential part in China's online political protests. Many internet celebrities are outstanding scholars, prominent businessmen, investigative journalists, and so forth. They care about the state of society and the future of the country and may come forward to support online political protests. Their opinions carry considerable weight in China's cyberspace and can influence Chinese netizens' decision on whether to participate in online political protests. Moreover, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and China's commercial media outlets are likely to become allies of online protesters. They can assist online protesters in attracting public attention and arousing public resonance.

However, the disappearance of the above conditions makes online political protests impossible to continue. The Chinese government, after all, is an authoritarian regime in nature, which has considerable material and organizational capacity. When an online political protest poses a threat to the regime's rule or challenges the top leadership's authority, state agencies can coordinate their efforts to suppress it quickly. It means that disagreements vanish among China's political elites on how to deal with the online political protest. In addition, internet control imposed on the protest will be no longer

flexible and lax but become extremely strict, and influence allies are likely to withdraw their support for online protesters and retreat into silence. Consequently, the online political protest ends quickly before achieving its goal. Online political protests in China remain powerless to challenge the Chinese party-state, and they have limited impacts on China's political changes.

1.4 Research Methodology

This section provides an overview of the methodology employed by this study. The thesis adopts the case study approach to examine the occurrence and end of China's online political protests. The case study approach is appropriate for scholars to obtain a concrete and deep appreciation of a contemporary phenomenon in its natural context.¹¹⁶ As argued by Yin, the case study approach is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in-depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident."¹¹⁷ Online political protest is a current social phenomenon in China. To explain why China's online political protests occur frequently and why their political effects are limited, the author needs to acquire definite, contextual, in-depth knowledge about the protest. The case study approach is particularly useful for the author to address the "why" question by exploring the whole process of an online political protest and its concrete details.

The thesis presents an examination of three cases from the three most common types of online political protests in China to test the validity of the main argument.¹¹⁸ Moreover,

¹¹⁶ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, Sixth ed. (SAGE Publications, 2017); Sarah Crowe et al., "The Case Study Approach," *BMC medical research methodology* 11 (2011).

¹¹⁷ Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 13.

¹¹⁸ The selection of these types of online political protests is based on reports of China's official think tanks and research by scholars. See: Blue Book of China's Society, a series of annual reports edited by sociologists from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Blue Book of Social Opinion, a series of annual reports on Chinese social opinion and crisis management made by Shanghai Jiao Tong University. Blue

in order to evaluate online political protests' impacts on China's political changes, the three cases are selected on the basis that they are the largest online protests (in terms of the number of posts generated by the protest) in their respective types over the past ten years. The author selects three cases based on a series of reports made by two influential Chinese think tanks. According to the number of posts created by an internet incident, the People's Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Centre (人民网舆情观察室) annually publishes a report on the top 20 largest internet incidents. Similarly, another influential think tank in China, Xinhuanet Online Public Opinion Monitoring and Analysis Centre (新华网网络舆情监测分析中心) releases a report on the top 30 largest internet incidents every year.

The first type refers to online protests against violent police enforcement. The issue of abuse of power by the police has been a significant cause for concern in China in the past decade. After being disclosed online, videos or pictures showing violence by police often attract public attention and may lead to online political protests. The Lei Yang event (雷洋事件) is the first case study presented in this thesis, which was the largest online protest at police misconduct over the past ten years. Furthermore, the Lei Yang event demonstrated that the Chinese middle class was awakening politically. After realizing the deteriorating legal situation, a large number of middle-class Chinese formed a coherent group to challenge the government. This collective action has rarely been observed in China's cyberspace. As argued by Simon Denyer, the Washington Post's bureau chief in China, "the case has sparked a rare show of anger from other middle-class urban professionals and fueled anxiety about a capricious legal system that many now fear can ensnare almost anyone."¹¹⁹

Book of Public Opinion in China, a series of annual reports edited by Yu Guoming (喻国明), a scholar at Beijing Normal University.

¹¹⁹ Simon Denyer, "A Young Man Died in Police Custody, and Middle-Class Chinese Are Outraged," *The Washington Post*, 2016, accessed 4 June, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/a-young-man-died-in-police-custody-and-middle-class-chinese-are-outraged/2016/12/30/44b03678-cdf1-11e6-85cd-e66532e35a44_story.html?utm_term=.590f9459f316.

The second type is about the online anti-corruption protest. Online anti-corruption protests refer to online grassroots (草根) movements against corruption.¹²⁰ Although successive Chinese governments set an agenda for anti-corruption, various anti-corruption activities led by ordinary citizens are often treated as political dissent and are suppressed by the Chinese government. For example, a number of grassroots anti-corruption websites in China, including woxinghuile.com (我行贿了), ibribery.com (我贿赂了), and 552phone.com (我行贿啦) were shut down by Chinese authorities.¹²¹ Besides, anti-corruption activists tend to be accused of disrupting public order and sent to jail.¹²² Nevertheless, collective action targeting political corruption occurs frequently in China's cyberspace. The Watch Brother event (表哥事件) is selected as a case study of online anti-corruption protests for this thesis. The event was the largest online anti-corruption protest over the past decade. Moreover, the case clearly showed the vital role of online social networks in assisting online anti-corruption activists in collecting evidence about government officials' corrupt practices. By virtue of online social networks, online anti-corruption activists can cooperate closely with each other in the absence of protest leaders.

The third type presented in this thesis is the online environmental protest. After years of sacrificing the natural environment to maintain economic growth, China's mounting

¹²⁰ In this thesis, online grassroots movements against corruption refer to citizen-led online corruption action, which is different from corruption campaigns launched by the Chinese government.

¹²¹ For more information, see Jingyin Deng, "Corruption Fighter Turns His Website over to Government," *The 21st Century*, 2011, accessed 16 February, 2018, <https://www.21cir.com/2011/08/corruption-fighter-turns-his-website-over-to-government/>; C. Custer, "Chinese Anti-Corruption Sites, Just Reopened, Now Closing Again?," *Tech in Asia*, 2011, accessed 12 December, 2017, <https://www.techinasia.com/chinese-anti-corruption-sites-just-reopened-now-closing-again>.

¹²² For more information, see Andrew Jacobs, "China Presses Crackdown on Campaign against Graft," *The New York Times*, 2013, accessed 14 July, 2018, <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20130422/c22arrests/dual/>; Damian Grammaticas, "Anti-Corruption Activists Trial Starts in China," *BBC*, 2013, accessed 15 June, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-china-24701627/anti-corruption-activists-trial-starts-in-china>; The Australian, "Chinese Anti-Corruption Activist Facing Jail for Protests," 2014, accessed 12 June, 2018, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/chinese-anticorruption-activist-facing-jail-for-protests/news-story/bf1050f6d297fecb9226516e35b8dded>.

environmental pollution has become one of the major social problems that harm public health. On China's Internet, people often express their concerns and opinions about a wide range of environmental issues that affect their lives and criticize the governments' poor performance of protecting the environment. The Chai Jing event (柴静事件) is the third case study in the thesis. It was the largest online environmental protest in China over the past decade. The Chai Jing event also represented ordinary urban residents' efforts to hold the Chinese government more accountable to provide a clean and healthy environment for all the people of the country.

The research data in the thesis comes from a range of sources. Online observations constitute a principal source of the research information. First, many scholars have ever pointed out the advantages of the observation method. Participant observation is "the process enabling researchers to learn about the activities of the people under study in the natural setting through observing and participating in those activities."¹²³ Mulhall argues that participant observation "provides insight into interactions between dyads and groups; illustrates the whole picture; captures context/process; informs about the influence of the physical environment."¹²⁴ In a similar vein, Morgan et al. contend that the observation method "allows direct examination of behavior/activity in real time; provides information about topics participants may be unwilling to talk about, unaware of, or unable to recall; and undertaken in naturally occurring contexts, allows examination of contextual factors."¹²⁵ Given the advantages of participant observation, many scholars, such as Yang Guobin and Zhou Yongming, have ever used online participant observation to collect data when studying online protests in China.¹²⁶

¹²³ Barbara B. Kawulich, "Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method," *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 6, no. 2 (2005).

¹²⁴ Anne Mulhall, "In the Field: Notes on Observation in Qualitative Research," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 41, no. 3 (2003).

¹²⁵ Sonya J. Morgan et al., "Case Study Observational Research: A Framework for Conducting Case Study Research Where Observation Data Are the Focus," *Qualitative Health Research* 27, no. 7 (2017).

¹²⁶ For more information, see Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China : Citizen Activism Online*; Yongming Zhou, *Historicizing Online Politics: Telegraphy, the Internet, and Political Participation in China* (Stanford University Press, 2006).

Second, the author learns from experience that participant observation is a useful method to gain a close familiarity with protest movements in China's cyberspace. The author began to surf the Internet in late 2002 and became an active member of several popular bulletin board system sites, including Tianya (天涯), KDnet (凯迪), the Strengthening Nation Forum (强国论坛). The author used to be one of the chief moderators of a chat room on Tianyan. In 2009, the author created a Sina Weibo (新浪微博) account and started to pay attention to breaking incidents on Sina Weibo. The author not only read posts but also, sometimes, engaged in online discussion and interacted with other Sina Weibo users. Experience convinces the author that the observation method can be used to acquire a deep knowledge about China's online political protests in its naturally occurring contexts.

Moreover, the author learns from experience that it is practical and convenient to carry out participant observation in Cyberspace. In the real world, when researchers conduct participant observation, they have to enter a community and try to be accepted into the community so that they can immerse themselves in it for a period of time.¹²⁷ By contrast, in cyberspace, most online communities have no definite boundaries, and most of their members remain anonymous and may live in different geographic areas. As a result, researchers can join in online communities easily and do not need to worry particularly about being excluded from them at some point during the research process.

To collect data and materials for this study, the author carried out participant observation on those individuals and groups that shared one thing in common—they were actively engaged in online political protests. For example, from 7 May 2016 to 1 February 2017, the author spent an average of three hours daily in monitoring and recording the dynamics of the Lei Yang event on Sina Weibo. Observation allowed the author to understand how

¹²⁷ Stephen L. Schensul, Jean J. Schensul, and Margaret Diane. LeCompte, *Essential Ethnographic Methods: Observations, Interviews, and Questionnaires* (AltaMira Press, 1999), 91-93.

the Lei Yang event developed. By closely observing online activists in naturally occurring settings, the author collected much information that could be more factual and objective than data obtained by self-reporting collection methods, such as interviews.

The value of the observation method is undeniable, but it has its limitations. For one thing, observers tend to be overwhelmed by huge amounts of information on Sina Weibo. Even if they can carry out around-the-clock observation, it is still likely that some valuable information will be missed out. The author's method is to observe several influential Sina Weibo accounts involved in online political protests at regular intervals. For another thing, posts, comments, and even accounts on Sina Weibo can be removed as politically sensitive content by China's authorities. As a result, how to preserve online information is a considerable difficulty. The author's method is to take screenshots of posts and comments on Sina Weibo and save them to computer files. In the past four years or so, the author has collected as many materials as he needs for this thesis. Also, some comments and posts used in this thesis come from China Digital Times¹²⁸ and FreeWeibo.¹²⁹ The two websites have stored a significant amount of posts and comments which have been blocked and deleted by Chinese authorities from Sina Weibo and allow people to undertake archival research.

In addition, some research information is collected from Chinese materials, including official documents of the Chinese government, news reports, laws and regulations, and research reports by Chinese research institutes. For example, the thesis analyzes statistical reports issued by CNNIC, especially "Research Report on the Behavior of Chinese Social Apps Users" and "Statistical Report on Internet Development in China." These reports contain extensive statistical data regarding the number of users, the types of users, and so

¹²⁸ China Digital Times is an independent, bilingual media organization which brings uncensored news and online voices from China to the world. See <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/about/>

¹²⁹ FreeWeibo is a website that monitors and makes available content from leading Chinese microblogging site Sina Weibo, which has been censored and deleted by Chinese authorities under the Great Firewall. See <https://freeweibo.com/en/>

forth. The data is helpful to understand how internet technologies facilitate the formation of online social networks and the dissemination of information.

1.5 Thesis Structure

The thesis contains eight chapters. They are organized to propose the research question and to support the central argument. The first chapter is the introduction, in which the research question and key argument are introduced. It also contains a literature review, research methodology, and the outline of the thesis.

Chapter 2 sets the theoretical foundation for the research. It comes up with a theoretical framework to analyze online political protests in China. In the first section, this chapter introduces the development of collective action and social movement theories, as well as important concepts that are used in the thesis. The second section gives a detailed review of the political opportunity structure theory, which functions as spotlights that shed light on factors that can create opportunities for online political protests. The third section extends the theory and proposes an online model of the political opportunity structure to examine the rise and decline of China's online political protests. A short conclusion is made in the final section.

Chapters 3 and 4 aim to further spell out the online model of the political opportunity structure. The two chapters provide deep knowledge for the empirical analysis presented in Chapters 5 to 7. Chapter 3 discusses the first three elements of the political opportunity structure for online political protests, namely elite divisions, online social networks, and influential allies and explains their implications for China's online political protests. Due to the complexity of China's internet control regime, Chapter 4 will focus on the fourth element, internet control. The first section of Chapter 3 discusses the main elite divisions in China and explains their roles in facilitating online political protests. The second section describes the development of the Internet and social media in China so as to

provide a better understanding of online social networks. Then, Section three and four respectively detail how online social networks and influential allies contribute to the emergence and development of China's online political protests. The last section is a short conclusion.

Chapter 4 concentrates on analyzing the fourth element of the political opportunity structure for online political protests—internet control. The first three sections discuss China's internet control before Xi Jinping's restructuring of China's internet regulators. The first section presents an in-depth analysis of the Chinese government's means of internet control. The second section identifies three main groups of state agencies standing at the hub of controlling China's internet. The third section examines the contradictions among China's internet regulators and their implications for China's internet control. The fourth section spells out the Xi Jinping's efforts to restructure China's internet regulatory bodies and explains why this institutional reform largely fails to produce the desired result. Finally, the fifth section provides a conclusion.

Chapter 5 offers the first case study, which is an analysis of an online protest against police brutality—the Lei Yang event. This chapter uses the online model of the political opportunity structure to explain the rise and decline of the Lei Yang case. The first section of this chapter describes the background to the Lei Yang event. The second section analyzes the political opportunity structure that contributes to the rise of the Lei Yang event. The third section detail why the event ended suddenly without achieving their goals. The fourth section offers some conclusions and discusses the impacts of online protests against violent police enforcement on China's political changes.

Chapter 6 illustrates the second case study, which is the Watch Brother event. Online anti-corruption is a popular way for ordinary citizens to combat official corruption in China. This chapter applies the online model of the political opportunity structure to examine why the online protests against political corruption can occur but end suddenly. The first

section reviews the process of the Watch Brother event. The second section analyzes the rise of the Watch Brother event, and the third section details what caused the end of the event. The last section concludes with some major findings and the discussion about the effects of online anti-corruption protests on the governance of corruption in China.

Chapter 7 presents the last case study, which is an analysis of an online environmental protest—the Chai Jing event. This chapter analyzes the cause of the birth and demise of the Chai Jing event. The first section provides background details of the event. The second section explains the rise of the event by analyzing its political opportunity structure. The third section identifies what caused the event to end. The fourth section summarizes major findings and discusses the potential of online environmental protests to bring about political changes in China.

Chapter 8 summarizes the major findings of the thesis. In addition, it assesses the implications of these findings for the future development of online political protests. Further, this chapter discusses the significance and proposes suggestions for further research.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework: The Online Model of the Political Opportunity Structure

This chapter aims to set the theoretical foundation for the thesis. It modifies and extends the Political Opportunity Structure (POS) theory to examine online political protests in China. Since the beginning of the 1980s, the POS theory has become one of the major theoretical perspectives in the study of collective action and social movements. The theory stresses structural variables that can offer possibilities for the mobilization and formation of collective action and social movements. China's sociopolitical configuration is characterized by the strong state and weak society.¹ In the process of state-society interaction, the state has an overwhelming advantage over society. In light of the tremendous material and organizational capacity of the party-state, the thesis stresses on opportunity structures created by the sociopolitical configuration of the state for China's internet users to stage and organize online protests. It puts forward the online model of the POS to explain the emergence and development of China's online political protests. In this thesis, elite divisions, internet control, online social networks, and influential allies have been identified as the key elements of the POS.

This chapter is organized into four sections. The first section introduces some significant theories of collective action and social movements, especially the collective action theory, which is vital to reach a good understanding of the POS theory. The second section expounds on the POS theory by discussing the concept of the POS, explaining its functional mechanism, and identifying key elements of the POS. In the third section, the

¹ Xiaoqin Guo, "State-Society Configuration," in *State and Society in China's Democratic Transition : Confucianism, Leninism, and Economic Development* (New York, United States: Routledge, 2003), 1-16; Zhiming Sheng, "Organizational Mobilization, Action Strategy and Opportunity Structure: Factors Affecting the Results of Homeowners' Collective Actions," *Chinese Journal of Sociology* 3, no. 4 (2017).

author proposes a modified model of POS to study online political protests in China. The fourth section is the conclusion.

2.1 Major Social Movement Theories

This section briefly introduces the development of social movement theories. It gives a detailed explanation of Olson's collective action theory because the theory transformed the research paradigm of social movement theories and provided a theoretical basis for the POS theory.

Prior to the 1960s, traditional theories of social movements played a leading role in explaining why social mobilization occurs and what its political consequences are. Traditional theories are often known as "the collective behavior theory,"² which includes a series of theories: contagion theory, circular reaction theory, emergent norm theory, value-added theory, mass society theory, relative deprivation theory, and J-curve theory.³

These theories have two common characteristics.⁴ First of all, they consider collective behavior to be a kind of social anomie caused by the collapse of social structures and poor social integration. For example, Gurr's relative deprivation theory seeks to explore the formation of collective behavior based on the masses' psychological state caused by social changes. Gurr argues that everybody has some kind of value expectations and that society possesses a certain level of value capabilities.⁵ He argues that when people's value expectations cannot be satisfied by the social capabilities due to social changes,

² Suzanne Staggenborg, *Social Movements* (Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2015), 14.

³ Steven M. Buechler, *Understanding Social Movements: Theories from the Classical Era to the Present* (Taylor & Francis, 2016), 59-74.

⁴ Ibid., 105; Staggenborg, *Social Movements*, 15.

⁵ Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, Fortieth anniversary paperback edition ed. (Routledge, 2016), 123-34.

feelings of relative deprivation will occur.⁶ Consequently, it is more likely for people who have a stronger feeling of relative deprivation to participate in social movements.⁷ Similarly, according to Turner and Killian's emergent norm theory, collective behavior can occur whenever people find themselves in a confusing situation in which they are faced with changes, uncertainties, and disorganizations.⁸ People are unsure how to behave in this situation, as previously established norms fail, and they begin to interact with other members of the group to develop new guidelines on how to behave. Once they find acceptable norms, they will be likely to engage in those behaviors.⁹

Second, these theories regard collective behavior as a means of emotion regulation and catharsis. More often than not, they use loneliness, frustration, anger, depression, confusion, anxiety, and other psychological factors to explain collective behavior. For instance, in 1891, Le Bon published his famous book, "The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind." In the book, he explains the formation of collective behavior based on psychological principles; also, he propounds the "contagion theory," which suggests that the crowd can exert a kind of hypnotic impact upon individuals.¹⁰ The hypnotic impact, together with the anonymity of the person in the group, leads to irrational, emotionally charged behavior.¹¹ Le Bon adds that once the collective mind is created, it will suppress individual personalities and overtake individuals' sense of self and personal responsibility.¹² Under the influence of the collective mind, individuals' rational thinking

⁶ Ibid., 105-13.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ralph H. Turner and Lewis M. Killian, *Collective Behavior* (Pearson Education Canada, 1987), 35-50.

⁹ Mikaila Mariel Lemonik Arthur, "Emergent Norm Theory," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements* (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2013).

¹⁰ Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, Dover edition ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 2002).

¹¹ Ibid., 7-14.

¹² Ibid.

and self-reflection are weakened, and their behavior turns irrational, violent, and inconceivable.¹³

Moreover, in Blumer's circular reaction theory, the restlessness of individuals is the leading cause of collective behavior's outbreaks. He claims that everyone has impulses and desires; when they cannot be satisfied by society, people will feel unhappy, depressed, anxious, and lonely, and thus they will become more restless.¹⁴ Through a process of circular reaction, individuals' restlessness could develop into social unrest.¹⁵ In a similar vein, the J-curve theory suggests that "it is the dissatisfied state of mind rather than the tangible provision of "adequate" or "inadequate" supplies of food, equality, or liberty which produces the revolution."¹⁶ It indicates that "revolutions are most likely to occur when a prolonged period of objective economic and social development is followed by a short period of sharp reversal."¹⁷

In brief, the collective behavior theory assumes that social movements hardly occur within a stable social institution; instead, fads, crazes, riots, rebellions, and revolutions are more likely to take place when society is undergoing strain or breakdown. Thus, the collective behavior theory is also known as "breakdown theories" or "strain and breakdown theories."¹⁸

The collective behavior theory had its heyday during the 1950s and 1960s. Since the late 1960s, the collective behavior theory came to be under fierce criticisms. To begin with,

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Prentice-Hall, 1969), 17.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ James C. Davies, "Toward a Theory of Revolution," *American Sociological Review* 27, no. 1 (1962).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Bert Useem, "Breakdown Theories of Collective Action," *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998); Steven M Buechler, "Strain and Breakdown Theories," *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements* (2004).

From the late 1950s to mid-1970s, a variety of social movements with contents of fighting for civil rights, democracy and freedom broke out around the world. Often, they were well organized to protest rationally. In this case, it is unreasonable to perceive collective action and social movements of this sort as the outcomes of irrational behavior and the breakdown of social structures. Secondly, those theories that claim that social movements are psychological phenomena ignore the political contexts in which movements occur and the political dimensions of collective behavior.¹⁹ It is untenable to treat collective behavior as a deviant behavior rather than political action. Because of deficiencies of the collective behavior theory, scholars attempted to seek a new paradigm to explore collective action and social movements.

The success of the paradigm shift of social movement theories owes much to the research made by Mancur Olson,²⁰ who was an American economist and social scientist. In 1965, Olson published his famous book, “The Logic of Collective Action.” In the book, he came up with the collective action theory. According to the collective action theory, collective action is the joint efforts of a horde of people to provide a public good.²¹ Olson defines the public good as “any good such that, if any person (X_i) in a group ($X_1, \dots, X_i, \dots, X_n$) consumes it, it cannot feasibly be withheld from others in that group.”²² The definition has an important implication: non-exclusion, which implies that one cannot exclude individuals from enjoying its benefits when the good is provided. For example, national defense, public transport systems, public parks, and other essential social goods can all be treated as public goods.

¹⁹ Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (University of Chicago Press, 1982), 17.

²⁰ Buechler, *Understanding Social Movements: Theories from the Classical Era to the Present*, 109.

²¹ Mancur. Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action* (Harvard University Press, 1965).

²² Ibid., 14.

However, non-exclusion can lead to a “free rider” problem. A free rider is “someone who obtains the benefit of a collective or public good without contributing to the cost of its provision.”²³ This problem implies that “the problem of motivating collective action is equivalent to the problem of motivating private contributions to a public or shared good.”²⁴ Olson believes that free-rider problems are not rare but common, because “rational” and “self-interested” individuals are not willing to work together to achieve their common interests.²⁵ The terms, “rational” and “self-interested,” mean that individual behavior is always driven by its costs and benefits and can facilitate personal utility-maximization.

To solve the free-rider problem, Olson argues that “only a separate and selective incentive will stimulate a rational individual in a latent group to act in a group-oriented way [...] The incentive must be ‘selective’ so that those who do not contribute to the attainment of the group’s interest, can be treated differently from those who do.”²⁶ In other words, selective incentives are Olson’s solution for dealing with the collective action problem. He lists some selective incentives and stresses that material incentives are important to encourage individuals to engage in collective action.²⁷ However, he does not confine selective incentives to material incentives, writing that “people are sometimes also motivated by a desire to win prestige, respect, friendship, and other social and psychological objectives.”²⁸ In addition, Olson adds that selective incentives also refer to “erotic incentives, psychological incentives, moral incentives, and so on.”²⁹

²³ Pamela Oliver, "Free Rider Problem," in *The Wiley - Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, ed. D. A. Snow, et al. (2013).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*, 14.

²⁶ Ibid., 51.

²⁷ Ibid., 60.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 61.

Based on Olson's study, scholars recast the research of collective action and first proposed the "resource mobilization theory" and then the POS theory sequentially. The resource mobilization theory emphasizes the process of how marginalized social actors obtain resources from resource providers and that the success of achieving their desired social change goals depends on whether they can acquire the needed resources, such as moral, cultural, social-organizational, human, and material resources.³⁰ The POS theory highlights those factors of the political environment that contribute to the emergence of collective action.³¹

The two theories hold the same opinion that grievances, inherent and enduring in almost every society, are necessary but not sufficient to give rise to the occurrence of social movements. They consider social movements to be political challenges by aggrieved individuals and draw more political, sociological, and economic theories to explain them than the collective behavior theory does. The new paradigm broke through the collective behavior theory's psychological tradition and marked the birth of new theories of social movements. Just as Buechler states, the theories of social movements have experienced a paradigm shift: from "psychologically rooted, grievance-driven, strain-induced explanations of collective behavior" to "rationally grounded, resource-based, political interpretations of collective action."³²

2.2 The POS Theory: A Detailed Examination

³⁰ Bob Edwards and John D McCarthy, "Resources and Social Movement Mobilization," *The Blackwell companion to social movements* (2004); John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory," *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 6 (1977); Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

³¹ David S. Meyer, "Protest and Political Opportunities," *Annual Review of Sociology* 30, no. 1 (2004); Marco Giugni, "Political Opportunities: From Tilly to Tilly," *Swiss Political Science Review* 15, no. 2 (2009).

³² Buechler, *Understanding Social Movements: Theories from the Classical Era to the Present*, 126.

2.2.1 The Concept of the POS

Since the beginning of the 1980s, the POS theory has become one of the main theoretical approaches to research on collective action and social movements. The term, “Political Opportunity Structure,” was first used by Eisinger in his paper, “The Conditions of Protest Behavior in American Cities.” In the paper, Eisinger claims that:

That is to say, such factors as the nature of the chief executive, the mode of aldermanic election, the distribution of social skills and status, and the degree of social disintegration, taken individually or collectively, serve in various ways to obstruct or facilitate citizen activity in pursuit of political goals. Other environmental factors, such as the climate of governmental responsiveness and the level of community resources, help to establish the chances of success of citizen political activity. In short, elements in the environment impose certain constraints on political activity or open avenues for it. The manner in which individuals and groups in the political system behave, then, is not simply a function of the resources they command but of the openings, weak spots, barriers, and resources of the political system itself. There is, in this sense, interaction, or linkage, between the environment, understood in terms of the notion of *a structure of political opportunities* (italicized by this author), and political behavior.³³

Eisinger does not rigidly define the term of POS. According to the quotation, the POS refers to factors of the political environment that increase chances of success of individuals’ goal achievement. The definition has an objective orientation, because “the chance of success” refers to the extent to which “some factor from the political environment leads to a group’s goal attainment.”³⁴

³³ Eisinger, "The Conditions of Protest Behavior in American Cities."

³⁴ Opp, *Theories of Political Protest and Social Movements: A Multidisciplinary Introduction, Critique, and Synthesis*, 169-71.

Other proponents of the POS theory put forward some objectively orientated definitions. Giugni refers to the POS as “those aspects of the political system that affect the possibilities that challenging groups have to mobilize effectively.”³⁵ Kitschelt claims that “political opportunity structures are comprised of specific configurations of resources, institutional arrangements and historical precedents for social mobilization, which facilitate the development of protest movements in some instances and constrain them in others.”³⁶ Moreover, McAdam argues that “by expanding political opportunities I mean changes in either the institutional features, informal political alignments, or repressive capacity of a given political system that significantly reduce the power disparity between a given challenging group and the state.”³⁷ Before confirming if an “expanding political opportunity” exists, one has to prove whether there is a “significant” decrease in “power disparity” between a protest group and the state. However, Opp points out problems of McAdam’s explanation, saying that “first it is unclear what exactly a ‘power disparity’ is: already the concept of ‘power’ is a vague concept and should thus be defined. It is further unclear what a ‘significant’ disparity is.”³⁸

Besides objectively orientated definitions, there are also subjectively orientated definitions of the POS. Tarrow defines the POS as “dimensions of the political environment or of change in that environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure.”³⁹ According to this definition, if some environmental variables can create incentives for

³⁵ Marco Giugni, "Political Opportunity: Still a Useful Concept?," in *Contention and Trust in Cities and States*, ed. Michael Hanagan and Chris Tilly (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2011), 271-83.

³⁶ Herbert P. Kitschelt, "Political Opportunity Structures and Political Protest: Anti-Nuclear Movements in Four Democracies," *British Journal of Political Science* 16, no. 1 (1986).

³⁷ Doug McAdam, "'Initiator' and 'Spin-Off' Movements: Diffusion Processes in Protest Cycles," in *Repertoires and Cycles of Collective Action*, ed. Mark Traugott (Duke University Press, 1995), 224.

³⁸ Opp, *Theories of Political Protest and Social Movements: A Multidisciplinary Introduction, Critique, and Synthesis*, 28.

³⁹ Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 163.

people by changing their expectations, they will be the POS. It is obvious that the subjective expectations substitute the chances of success.

The thesis will adopt Tarrow's definition, a subjectively orientated definition. For one thing, it is, in most cases, nearly impossible to measure the objective probability that environmental factors will affect the goal attainment. For another thing, even though opportunities objectively exist, if people cannot perceive them, their existence is useless.⁴⁰ As argued by Gamson and Meyer, "an opportunity not recognized is no opportunity at all."⁴¹

2.2.2 The Functional Mechanism of the POS Theory

After examining the causes of the riots that took place in the U.S. during the 1960s, Eisinger found that the relationship between the protest levels and the nature of a city's POS was not straightforward.⁴² He put forward a "curvilinear model" to depict the relationship. According to the model, protests are most likely to occur in cities with a mixed open and closed political system. Protests are not tolerated in an extremely closed (repressive) system and are unnecessary in a highly open (responsive) system.⁴³ Eisinger explains that:

Protest occurs in a mixed system because the pace of change does not keep up with expectations, even though change is occurring. As the political opportunity structure becomes more open, previously powerless groups begin to acquire influence. The acquisition and development of influence, however, is likely to come slowly.

⁴⁰ Giugni, "Political Opportunities: From Tilly to Tilly."

⁴¹ William A. Gamson and David S. Meyer, "Framing Political Opportunity," in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, ed. Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁴² Eisinger, "The Conditions of Protest Behavior in American Cities," 25.

⁴³ Ibid.

Conventional strategies of political influence may appear too slow and unwieldy to effect significant gratification. In a system which is opening up, the realization that the system may be vulnerable or responsive to political efforts combined with the persistence of inequities becomes intolerable for some groups. Hence, these groups may resort to protest to express their impatience, even when the system may be viewed in relative terms as a responsive one.⁴⁴

Further, Johnston points out that costs and incentives that shape these relationships between the protest levels and POSs are not aggression, frustration, or anger but the rational calculation of interests.⁴⁵ If a political system has vast openness, it is unnecessary for activists to risk staging a political protest, because they have access to policy-makers through various institutional channels.⁴⁶ By contrast, in a highly closed political system, if aggrieved groups attempt to lodge a political protest, they have to take the risk of government reprisal, such as being jailed, losing jobs, and so forth. As a result, after calculating individual gains and losses, they may find the pay-offs are too low to pursue political mobilization.⁴⁷ Thus, only can a mixed system offer conditions for protests. Therefore, the mechanism works like that the POS can give rise to individual protest activities by providing incentives to affect the individual calculation of losses and benefits. In a similar vein, Tarrow proposes a mechanism about how the POS works: “dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure.”⁴⁸ In short, scholars believe that the POS can influence individual participation by creating incentives, and then individuals’ acts of protest coalesce into collective protest action.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Hank Johnston, *What Is a Social Movement?* (Wiley, 2014), 51.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ David S. Meyer and Debra C. Minkoff, "Conceptualizing Political Opportunity," *Social Forces* 82, no. 4 (2004).

Although arguing that incentives motivate individuals to engage in protest activities, Eisinger, Johnston, and Tarrow do not spell out what specific incentives are. What incentives can influence individuals to engage in protest activities? As mentioned before, Olson suggests that selective incentives can address collective action problems by influencing people's desire to participate in collective action. He listed material incentives, like money of sorts, and immaterial incentives, such as prestige, reputation, and moral. Based on Olson's studies, Opp divided selective incentives into two groups—economic and non-economic incentives.⁴⁹ Economic incentives are tangible, including money, goods, office space, equipment, personal security, and good ecological environment, whereas non-economic incentives (also called soft incentives) refer to intangible inducements.⁵⁰ Collective identity is one of the most important soft incentives.⁵¹ Polletta and Jasper refer to collective identity as “an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution.”⁵² Snow defines collective identity as “a shared sense of ‘one-ness’ or ‘we-ness’ anchored in real or imagined shared attributes and experiences among those who comprise the collectivity and in relation or contrast to one or more actual or imagined sets of ‘others.’”⁵³ Generally speaking, collective identity is a person's sense of belonging to a particular group.

Collective identity can mobilize potential participants by providing pleasures and incurring a sense of responsibility.⁵⁴ Bruce and Gamson find that “a person whose life is

⁴⁹ Opp, *Theories of Political Protest and Social Movements: A Multidisciplinary Introduction, Critique, and Synthesis*, 204-10.

⁵⁰ "Soft Incentives and Collective Action: Participation in the Anti-Nuclear Movement," *British Journal of Political Science* 16, no. 1 (1986).

⁵¹ *Theories of Political Protest and Social Movements: A Multidisciplinary Introduction, Critique, and Synthesis*, 226; Debra Friedman and Doug McAdam, "Collective Identity and Activism: Networks, Choices, and the Life of a Social Movement," in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*. (New Haven, CT, US: Yale University Press, 1992); Francesca Polletta and James M. Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements," *Annual Review of Sociology* 27, no. 1 (2001).

⁵² "Collective Identity and Social Movements."

⁵³ David Snow, "Collective Identity and Expressive Forms," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, ed. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (Oxford: Pergamon, 2001).

⁵⁴ Polletta and Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements."

intertwined with the group (through friendship, kinship, organizational membership, informal support networks, or shared relations with outsiders) has a big stake in the group's fate."⁵⁵ Opp argues that once a person identifies with a group, he/she will be concerned about the well-being of the group.⁵⁶ Put differently, collective identity makes people feel a strong desire to improve the situation of the group with which they identify. To satisfy the desire, they are more likely to participate in a collective action that may make the collectivity better off; also, they will be conscience-stricken if remaining inactive.⁵⁷ It is fair to say that the sense of satisfaction is a benefit, and a guilty conscience is a cost.

In general, people participate in collective action because of selective incentives. Not only can economic incentives mobilize individuals to participate in collective action, but non-economic incentives are also significant to attract participants. Collective identity, a sense of belonging to a particular group, serves a vital function as mental inducements. People who have established identification with a group are highly likely to engage in a movement that is good for the collectivity.

2.2.3 The Elements of the POS

What elements does the POS consist of? In the course of studying collective action, scholars have identified different elements of the POS. Eisinger concentrates on the openness of the polity and argues that the POS includes the formal structure of local government, the mode of aldermanic election, and partisan systems or nonpartisan ones.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Bruce Fireman and William A Gamson, "Utilitarian Logic in the Resource Mobilization Perspective," in *The Dynamics of Social Movements: Resource Mobilization, Social Control, and Tactics*, ed. Mayer N Zald and John David McCarthy (Winthrop Publishers, 1979), 8-44.

⁵⁶ Opp, *Theories of Political Protest and Social Movements: A Multidisciplinary Introduction, Critique, and Synthesis*, 226.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Eisinger, "The Conditions of Protest Behavior in American Cities."

He contends that mayor-council governments, in which the mayor is elected by constituencies, are more accountable to citizens than manager-council governments, in which the mayor is hired by the city council.⁵⁹ Aldermanic elections offer residually concentrated minorities more changes for political expression than at-large electoral systems, and partisan systems are able to afford groups more opportunities to get access to government than non-partisan ones.⁶⁰ This is because “parties aggregate diverse interests as a requisite of persistent viability and rely over time on identifiable blocs of voters for whom they supply cues and to whom they must account.”⁶¹

Eisinger’s formula of the POS has been refined and expanded by other scholars. McAdam claims that political openness is just one of several elements that create opportunities, and only considering a political system’s openness or closure fails to explain collective action.⁶² He puts forward four factors: “the relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system; the stability or instability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity; the presence or absence of elite allies; the state’s capacity and propensity for repression.”⁶³ In a similar vein, Tarrow states that POSs can be “discerned along so many directions and in so many ways that it is less a variable than a cluster of variables—some more readily observable than others.”⁶⁴ He further points out that the elements of the POS include “opening of access to participation for new actors, evidence of political realignment within the polity, availability of influential allies, and emerging splits within the elite.”⁶⁵ Máiz argue that the POS mainly

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 275-90.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Sidney Tarrow, "National Politics and Collective Action: Recent Theory and Research in Western Europe and the United States," *Annual Review of Sociology* 14 (1988).

⁶⁵ *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 164-65.

consist of variables which refer to “the characteristics of the political system in which mobilization takes place: an open or closed political system, stability or instability of electoral alignments, presence or absence of future allies, divisions among the elites in power, and other variables of this kind.”⁶⁶

The POS’s formulas proposed by Eisinger, McAdam, Tarrow, and Máiz are designed to explain protests in the democratic context. There may be some doubt about whether these formulas are equally applicable to examine protest in non-democratic countries. Osa and Schock argue that the sociopolitical configuration of the state influences opportunities, and democracies and non-democracies should have different political opportunity structures.⁶⁷ They explain that:

Clearly, there are different parameters for organizing political opposition in a democracy—where civil rights are protected, the press is free, courts and legislatures are independent of the executive, and mechanisms for regular transfers of political power are institutionalized (however imperfectly these ideals are implemented)—versus in non-democracies. In non-democracies, rights to associate and to speak freely are constrained, press and publishing are censored, secret police infiltrate society, economic opportunities and jobs depend on political qualifications, judiciaries are not independent, transfers of power are irregular, and repression or the threat of repression is omnipresent. Further, the ability to articulate an alternative political discourse is not given, the risk of associating with regime opponents and advocating policies not sanctioned by authorities is costly, and resources that may be used to oppose the regime are difficult to acquire. Therefore, opportunities and other factors affecting mobilization probabilities in democracies should diverge from those

⁶⁶ Ramón Máiz, "Politics and the Nation: Nationalist Mobilisation of Ethnic Differences," *Nations and Nationalism* 9, no. 2 (2003).

⁶⁷ Maryjane Osa and Kurt Schock, "A Long, Hard Slog: Political Opportunities, Social Networks and the Mobilization of Dissent in Non-Democracies," in *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* (Emerald, 2007).

in non-democracies because of the very different institutions upon which state power rests.⁶⁸

Furthermore, Osa and Schock contend that opportunity structures, in non-democracies, stem from failures of the regime's mechanisms and are more crucial for mobilizing support for challengers, owing to the high cost of collective action.⁶⁹ According to Osa and Schock, in non-democratic countries, opportunity structures for political mobilization come from some combination of five factors: divided elites, influential allies, increasing/decreasing repression, information flows, and social networks.⁷⁰

2.3 The Online Model of the POS

This section uses the POS theory to build a theoretical model to explore China's online political protest. The thesis modifies Osa and Schock's formula and extends it to the study of China's online political protest. It comes up with the online model of the POS. In the model, the POS includes four elements—elite divisions, internet control, online social networks, and influential allies. The combination of the four elements can determine the occurrence and development of online political protests in China.

2.3.1 Elite Divisions

In democratic countries, elites from all walks of life share political powers. They can be senior civil servants, leaders of parties, managers and directors of major public and private economic enterprises, prominent intellectuals, well-known journalists, religious leaders, and leaders of mass organizations, such as labor unions, farm groups, and civic

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

associations.⁷¹ However, in most non-democracies, political powers are concentrated in the hands of political elites. They are elites ruling the country.

Elite Divisions in non-democracies mean that political elites may have incompatible positions and tend to get into disputes as to how to handle a given issue. As argued by Osa and Schock, elite divisions in non-democracies refer to not only disagreements about political and economic decisions but also “disputes over the institutional basis of politics, the methods of succession, or the formula for rule.”⁷² Osa and Schock add that “elite divisions signal regime vulnerability and provide opportunities for challengers by increasing the incentives to engage in collective action.”⁷³ This is because elite divisions make it possible for protesters to gain support and protection from political elites of a country. Some ruling elites may take advantage of protests to earn public trust, damage their political opponents’ reputation, and strengthen their political position. In this case, they are willing to provide support and protection to protesters, which can reduce protesters’ risks of engaging in acts of protest. For example, some political elites can publicly express sympathies for protests, praise protesters, acknowledge the legitimacy of protests, and even provide specialized knowledge regarding negotiations. Moreover, they may also provide material resources, including food, money, equipment, and offices, so that the costs of participating in collective action would decrease for individuals.

China is a one-party state in which the CCP monopolizes powers. Only does the CCP have the right to form the government, and all other parties are either outlawed or permitted to take only a limited and controlled participation in politics. In other words, minor parties have minimal power and are almost utterly subservient to the CCP. As a

⁷¹ Fredrik Engelstad, "Introduction: Social and Political Elites in Modern Democracies," in *Comparative Studies of Social and Political Elites*, ed. Engelstad Fredrik and Gulbrandsen Trygve, Comparative Social Research (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2006).

⁷² Osa and Schock, "A Long, Hard Slog: Political Opportunities, Social Networks and the Mobilization of Dissent in Non-Democracies."

⁷³ Ibid.

result, China does not have oppositional political parties, which is one of the most remarkable elite divisions in democratic countries. However, there are still elite divisions in other forms in China.

Before proceeding further, China's political elites are defined in this thesis as those elites who hold political powers in significant government agencies. They contain local political elites—leaders in local governments—and central political elites—senior officials in central government, including party and state leaders⁷⁴ and ministerial officials in different central government departments. They are the most powerful people in China, and their activities and political calculation would have considerable effects on the POSs of collective actions in China.

Political elites are often highly protective of the perceived interests and goals of government agencies that they stand for. They have formed different groups to defend and broaden the turf of the specific bureaucratic apparatuses that they represent. As some government apparatuses have distinct interests, political elites belonging to them are likely to have different opinions or judgments on a given political issue. Therefore, conflicting interests existing in the bureaucratic structure have contributed to elite divisions. Horizontally, competing interests among different government authorities at the same level have caused elite divisions. Vertically, conflicting interests among governments at different levels have also caused elite divisions. Due to the decentralization in China after the 1980s, diverging interests between the central and local governments are particularly prominent, which have brought into splits between the central political elites and local ones.

⁷⁴ China's leaders of party and state refer to government officials at or above vice-state-leader level (副国级). For more information, see Fairbank Center Blog, "Infographic: China's Leaders of Party and State after the 13th Npc and Cppcc," *Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies*, 2018, accessed 5 May, 2019, <https://fairbank.fas.harvard.edu/infographic-chinas-leaders-of-party-and-state-after-the-13th-npc-and-cppcc/>.

This thesis concentrates on elite divisions between the central and local governments and those within the central government because most of the online political protests that had occurred in China are due to opportunities created by these elite divisions. In China, the great majority of ordinary citizens' grievances are often directly linked to local governments' wrongdoings, and those grievances are often expressed through online protests to attract the central government's attention. Local governments are responsible for the day-to-day management of local communities. Compared with the central government, their behavior has direct impacts on the wellbeing of ordinary citizens. Consequently, the public has mostly encountered malfeasance and witnessed corruption at the local level. In other words, local governments are more likely than the central government to have head-on interest clashes with the common people. Even though the root cause of these conflicts is sometimes in the central government's policies, many Chinese citizens may not identify it. According to a survey on Chinese citizens' attitudes to their government made by the Ash Center at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard in 2010, since 2003, Chinese citizens have been highly satisfied with the central government, but their satisfaction with the local government has stayed consistently at a relatively low level.⁷⁵ The Ash Center's most recent survey (in 2014) found that 92.8 percent of Chinese citizens were satisfied and 37.6 percent are extremely satisfied with the central government.⁷⁶ Also, it found that only 7.8 percent of Chinese citizens were extremely satisfied and 47 percent relatively satisfied with local governments.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Tony Saich, "The Quality of Governance in China: The Citizens' View," (Harvard Kennedy School, 2012).

⁷⁶ Michael Forsythe, "Q. And A.: Tony Saich on What Chinese Want from Their Leaders," *The New York Times*, 2015, accessed 1 July, 2019, <https://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/09/11/anthony-saich-china-communist-party/>.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

More significantly, many scholars find that Chinese citizens have a high level of trust in the central government.⁷⁸ Li points out that the Chinese people's trust in China's central authorities has remained consistently high since the early 1990s.⁷⁹ As the central government enjoys a high level of trust, many Chinese citizens may attempt to voice their complaints online to compel the central government's attention when suffering from or witnessing misconduct by local governments. The central-local elite divisions make it impossible for them to gain positive responses from the central government.

In addition, some complaints and discontent are related to central government officials or central government departments' policies, and individuals may attempt to launch online protests at them. These online protesters can ask for help from the CCP's top leaders with the hope that they could receive favorable responses. For instance, some internet users expose information about a central government official's bribery and corruption. It is possible for them to draw senior leaders' attention. Also, elite divisions among central government departments may allow them opportunities. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that when remonstrating with one central government body's policy, online activists may obtain support and protection from other bodies. Chapter 3 will analyze central-local elite divisions as well as elite divisions within the central government and expound on their roles in contributing to online political protests in China.

Of course, China's political elites can also be influenced by the conduct of factionalism in leadership politics. Alice Miller, a scholar from Hoover Institution, argues that "despite longstanding party prohibitions against factionalism, it is abundantly clear from PRC political history and from regime discourse that factions have been an inevitable and

⁷⁸ Lianjiang Li, "The Magnitude and Resilience of Trust in the Center: Evidence from Interviews with Petitioners in Beijing and a Local Survey in Rural China," *Modern China* 39, no. 1 (2013); Tianjian Shi, "Cultural Values and Political Trust: A Comparison of the Peoples Republic of China and Taiwan," *Comparative Politics* 33, no. 4 (2001); Yida Zhai, "Traditional Values and Political Trust in China," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 53, no. 3 (2018).

⁷⁹ Li, "The Magnitude and Resilience of Trust in the Center: Evidence from Interviews with Petitioners in Beijing and a Local Survey in Rural China."

integral aspect of leadership politics since 1949.”⁸⁰ Some factions frequently appear in media reports, including “Shanghai gang” (上海帮), “Youth League faction” (团派), “Petroleum gang” (石油帮), “Xishan society” (西山会), and so forth.⁸¹

However, the influence of factionalism in leadership politics on China’s political elites is not the focus of this thesis. There is no reliable information to clearly identify China’s political elites according to factions. China’s political system is highly opaque to outsiders so that China watchers can only obtain some obscure clues and hints to identify leadership factions. As a result, the taxonomy of leadership factions is highly debatable. Whether some factions or gangs reported by the media really exist within the Party-state is doubtful. More importantly, even if factions have been in existence, it is hard to identify its followers, except for factional leaders. Therefore, the author tends to focus on those elite divisions caused by the bureaucratic structure.

2.3.2 Internet Control

Before introducing internet control, it is necessary to explain how government repression works on protesters. Repression is “the act of subduing someone by institutional or physical force.”⁸² It is a crucial tool wielded by government authorities to prevent, impede, or control collective action because it has a deterrence effect, which diminishes

⁸⁰ Alice L Miller, “The Trouble with Factions,” *China Leadership Monitor* 46 (2015).

⁸¹ For more information, See D.M. Finkelstein and M. Kivlehan, *Chinas Leadership in the Twenty-First Century: The Rise of the Fourth Generation: The Rise of the Fourth Generation* (Taylor & Francis, 2015); Jiyoung Choi, “A Study on the Communist Youth League and the Tuanpai as a Political Faction,” *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies* 23 (2018); Shannon Tiezzi, “Zhou Yongkang’s Greatest Crime,” *The Diplomat*, 2015, accessed 28 July, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/04/zhou-yongkangs-greatest-crime/>; Francois Dubé, “Xis China Dream Comes to Coal Country,” *The Diplomat*, 2016, accessed 28 July, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/11/xis-china-dream-comes-to-coal-country/>.

⁸² Jacqueline H. R. deMeritt, “The Strategic Use of State Repression and Political Violence,” *Oxford University Press*, updated 2016-10-26, 2016, accessed 10 April, 2018, <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-32>.

protests by pushing up the cost of organization and mobilization.⁸³ There are overt and covert repressive strategies, such as harassment, coercion, spying, arrests, torture, and sanction.⁸⁴ Repression in democracies usually occurs to a lesser degree. Democratic countries are more likely to use repression when protesters engage in unlawful activities such as violence or are regarded to be a direct threat to elites.⁸⁵ Conversely, non-democracies, by contrast, tend to have a higher level of repression. Repression in democracies usually occurs to a lesser degree. Viewed as a pillar of stability by the rulers, repression is far more pervasive in non-democratic regimes. It may stretch from lesser models of coercion and intimidation to the harshest punishment of physical torture upon citizens.

However, some scholars find that repression also has radicalization effects.⁸⁶ On some occasions, repression has been followed by larger strikes, demonstrations, boycotts, riots, and rallies. In other words, repression provokes more widespread protests rather than discouraging them. The phenomenon that repression backfires is called as “political jiu-jitsu,”⁸⁷ the “critical dynamic,”⁸⁸ or “backfire.”⁸⁹ Many scholars have provided

⁸³ C. Davenport, *Media Bias, Perspective, and State Repression: The Black Panther Party* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 74-92; Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*, 60-88; Jean Calterone Williams, "The Politics of Homelessness: Shelter Now and Political Protest," *Political Research Quarterly* (2005); Judson L. Jeffries, "Black Radicalism and Political Repression in Baltimore: The Case of the Black Panther Party," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25, no. 1 (2002).

⁸⁴ Osa and Schock, "A Long, Hard Slog: Political Opportunities, Social Networks and the Mobilization of Dissent in Non-Democracies."; Jennifer Earl, "Political Repression: Iron Fists, Velvet Gloves, and Diffuse Control," *Annual review of sociology* 37 (2011); Christian Davenport, "State Repression and Political Order," *Annual Review of Political Science* 10, no. 1 (2007).

⁸⁵ Osa and Schock, "A Long, Hard Slog: Political Opportunities, Social Networks and the Mobilization of Dissent in Non-Democracies."

⁸⁶ Charles D. Brockett, "A Protest-Cycle Resolution of the Repression/Popular-Protest Paradox," *Social Science History* 17, no. 3 (1993); David Snyder and Charles Tilly, "Hardship and Collective Violence in France, 1830 to 1960," *American Sociological Review* 37, no. 5 (1972); Marwan Khawaja, "Repression and Popular Collective Action: Evidence from the West Bank," *Sociological Forum* 8, no. 1 (1993).

⁸⁷ Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action: The Methods of Nonviolent Action* (P. Sargent Publisher, 1973), 176-95.

⁸⁸ McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*.

⁸⁹ David Hess and Brian Martin, "Repression, Backfire, and the Theory of Transformative Events," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (2006).

explanations for the phenomenon that appears to be counter-intuitive. Opp and Roehl argue that increasing repression considered to be illegitimate provokes moral indignation and social incentives that spark more massive protests.⁹⁰ Hess and Martin claim that repression perceived as unjust is likely to generate considerable public outrage, which can trigger more extensive political mobilization.⁹¹

In effect, repression has both deterrent and radicalizing effects on individual protest behavior. This is because repression tends to raise the cost of political participation while increasing non-economic incentives. As mentioned before, individuals will calculate the expected costs and benefits of their actions when pondering on whether to participate in protest action. If repressive measures can induce moral courage more than tangible costs for people, the protest is likely to become larger. However, when repression reaches a certain level at which the costs outweigh the benefits, it could start to diminish protests.

As countries have different repressive capacities, the effectiveness of repression on protest is different. Consequently, scholars have found different relationships between repression and protest: a negative relationship, a positive relationship, and an inverted “U-shaped” relationship.⁹² The negative relationship means that repression reduces protest, the positive relationship repression encourages protest, and the last relationship means that protests are lowest at low and high levels of repression, and most significant at mid-level of repression.⁹³ All in all, by affecting individuals’ cost-benefit calculation,

⁹⁰ Karl-Dieter Opp and Wolfgang Roehl, "Repression, Micromobilization, and Political Protest," *Social Forces* 69, no. 2 (1990).

⁹¹ Hess and Martin, "Repression, Backfire, and the Theory of Transformative Events."

⁹² Osa and Schock, "A Long, Hard Slog: Political Opportunities, Social Networks and the Mobilization of Dissent in Non-Democracies."

⁹³ Terry Boswell and William J. Dixon, "Marx's Theory of Rebellion: A Cross-National Analysis of Class Exploitation, Economic Development, and Violent Revolt," *American Sociological Review* 58, no. 5 (1993); J. DeNardo, *Power in Numbers: The Political Strategy of Protest and Rebellion* (Princeton University Press, 2014); Edward N. Muller and Erich Weede, "Cross-National Variation in Political Violence," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 34, no. 4 (1990).

government repression influences individuals' decisions on whether to engage in collective acts of protest.

In the field of cyberspace, internet control is a key form of state repression. It is a crucial method to regulate the behavior of users in cyberspace. Almost all countries, regardless whether they are democracies or non-democracies, impose control on the Internet to varying degrees and have adopted some form of internet control for one reason or another. Democratic internet regulators are mainly concerned with libel, copyright infringement, child pornography, racism, the instigation of violence, right-wing extremism, and cybercrimes.⁹⁴ By contrast, non-democratic regimes pay more attention to the suppression of political dissidents and mass protests. For example, Russia's government has blocked an enormous number of dissident websites, and many Kremlin critics' blogs have been blocked.⁹⁵ In Vietnam, the government released a law called Decree 72, which has overarching provisions to prevent access to websites with anti-government or anti-communist content.⁹⁶ Pakistan has been tightening its internet censorship to crack down heavily on social media websites with content that opposes authorities and defend human rights.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Asher Wolf, "Censorship in the Name of Protecting Children," *ABC News*, 2014, accessed 12 October, 2016, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-01-31/wolf-internet-censorship/5229690>; Matthew Lasar, "Nazi Hunting: How France First 'Civilized' the Internet," *Ars Technica*, 2011, accessed 10 October, 2016, <https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2011/06/how-france-proved-that-the-internet-is-not-global/>; Frank Fisher, "Caught in the Web," *The Guardian*, 2008, accessed 28 July, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/jan/17/caughtintheweb>; Sean Gallagher, "French President Promises Law to Make Viewing 'Hate Sites' an Offense," *Ars Technica*, 2012, accessed 17 October, 2016, <https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2012/03/thoughtcrime-french-president-promises-law-to-make-viewing-hate-sites-criminal/>.

⁹⁵ Agence France-Presse, "Russia Censors Media by Blocking Websites and Popular Blog," *The Guardian*, 2014, accessed 17 Dec, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/14/russia-bans-alexei-navalny-blog-opposition-news-websites>.

⁹⁶ Mong Palatino, "Decree 72: Vietnam's Confusing Internet Law," *The Diplomat*, 2013, accessed 17 Dec, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2013/08/decree-72-vietnams-confusing-internet-law/>.

⁹⁷ Asad Hashim, "Surveilling and Censoring the Internet in Pakistan," *Al Jazeera* 2015, accessed 5 Nov, 2017 <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/05/pakistan-internet-censorship-150506124129138.html>.

As for China, to restrict online political protests, the government has established a sophisticated and stringent internet regulation regime with advanced internet technologies and policy initiatives.⁹⁸ The Chinese government has employed various internet technologies to raise individuals' cost of collecting and diffusing information, such as filtering online content and blocking websites. Additionally, Chinese authorities compel individuals and organizations to engage in self-censorship by creating legal liability for them.⁹⁹ Internet service providers (ISPs) and ICPs are required to implement internet policies to identify and clamp down on the transmission of information deemed by the government to be unlawful. Moreover, individuals need to avoid talking about issues that the government deems objectionable and keep away from the action that may jeopardize state security and disrupt social stability. Violators may get arrested and thrown in prison, or worse. Because of intimidation or out of fear of legal or other consequences, many individuals and organizations are cautious about participating in political protests. It is fair to say that the Chinese government has been trying to create a deterrent effect by utilizing internet control to reduce incentives for organizations and individuals to take part in online political protests.

However, China's internet control also has some radicalizing effects on internet users' acts of protest. Lan finds that internet regulators' deletion of some information about an incident can arouse internet users' intense curiosity about it.¹⁰⁰ Tong and Lei argue that the censorship and deletion of a breaking incident and the resulting comments often generate many netizens' outrage at the government.¹⁰¹ More importantly, in practice,

⁹⁸ Zheng, *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State, and Society in China*, 67-91; Chung, "Comparing Online Activities in China and South Korea: The Internet and the Political Regime."; Xu, Mao, and Halderman, "Internet Censorship in China: Where Does the Filtering Occur?," 133-42.

⁹⁹ Cuiming Pang, "Self-Censorship and the Rise of Cyber Collectives: An Anthropological Study of a Chinese Online Community," *Intercultural Communication Studies* VXII, no. 3 (2008).

¹⁰⁰ Xiangdong Lan, "互联网时代注意从三方面提升司法权威 [Improve Judicial Authority from Three Aspects in the Internet Age]," *The Procuratorate Daily*, 2016, accessed 3 March, 2019, https://www.spp.gov.cn/llyj/201608/t20160801_160699.shtml.

¹⁰¹ Qizhi Sheng and Senyu Gao, "Opinion Leaders of Chinese Microblogs: Features, Types and Development Trends," *Journal of Northeastern University(Social Science)* 4 (2013).

China's internet control is prone to be arbitrary and capricious. Due to no geographical limitations in cyberspace, the Chinese central government has devolved little authority of regulating the Internet to local governments. In other words, local governments have limited legal powers over the administration of China's Internet. However, many central government departments with diverging bureaucratic interests engage in regulating China's Internet. Bureaucratic turf wars occur time and time again, which have lessened the government's competence in internet control.

Moreover, China's internet control is susceptible to China's websites' commercial interests. The competition among China's popular websites is intense. Web traffic is their core interests. If one web company always performs strict self-censorship, it is impossible for it to increase its web traffic and defeat opponents. Therefore, China's websites are not entirely faithful to the government and tend to allow users to discuss some sensitive topics. The incoherent and capricious practice of internet control has opened possibilities for online political protests. Chapter 4 expounds on China's internet control and how internet control influences online political protests.

2.3.3 Online Social Networks

The other major element of POS in relation to online political protests in China is online social networks. The thesis uses online social networks to substitute the two elements of information flows and social networks in Osa and Schock's formula. Prior to providing the reason why this substitution is made, this section clarifies the roles of information flows and social networks in facilitating collective action.

Information flows refer to the dissemination of information. According to Olson, poor flow of information is one of the main obstacles of launching collective action.¹⁰² Porta

¹⁰² Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*, 146-50.

and Mattoni argue that protesters need to diffuse information regarding their complaints and demands as widely as possible to mobilize potential participants, obtain social supporters, and draw political elites' attention.¹⁰³ Similarly, as argued by Oliver and Myers, "protests that receive no news coverage are often construed as failures. Protests that receive news coverage are likely to be invigorated, and activists are likely to prolong their activism and emit more total protests if they have received news coverage."¹⁰⁴ In other words, protesters often need to compel the news media's attention, and they can then leverage news coverage to strike a chord with the public and exert influence on authorities.

In authoritarian countries, how to receive news coverage is a big challenge for political protests. The reason lies in the censorship of the media. Authoritarian countries have long kept a tight rein on the media to avoid public undermining of their authority.¹⁰⁵ Every dictator dislikes free media and regards it as a curse for their regime. For instance, in Cuba, the state holds a virtual monopoly on mass media, and freedom of expression is severely restricted and can even land people in prison. Autocratic Middle Eastern states, like Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, exert systematic controls and pervasive censorship on media and information. In order to control the flow of information, non-democratic states have imposed a variety of constraints. They censor news coverage to filter content that is critical of the regime, monopolize mass media by cracking down alternative publications, employ economic sanctions, and imprison journalists. As a result, it is hard for activists in authoritarian countries to exploit the media to spread information and attract public attention. They tend to bear high costs when attempting to spread information widely. Only if activists can find relatively inexpensive ways to improve information flows, there

¹⁰³ Donatella della Porta and Alice Mattoni, "Social Movements," in *The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2015), 1-8.

¹⁰⁴ Pamela Oliver and Daniel J Myers, "Networks, Diffusion, and Cycles of Collective Action," in *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action*, ed. Mario Diani and Doug McAdam (Oxford University Press, 2003), 188.

¹⁰⁵ Osa and Schock, "A Long, Hard Slog: Political Opportunities, Social Networks and the Mobilization of Dissent in Non-Democracies."

will be more opportunities for them to stage protests. Under such circumstances, they often need to rely on social networks to diffuse information and establish communication.

Social networks are “a set of individuals connected through socially meaningful relationships, such as friendship, co-working or information exchange.”¹⁰⁶ Grzegorz et al. see a social network as a finite set of actors (i.e., people or groups of people) with some patterns of social relationships between them.¹⁰⁷ In general, social networks include nodes (actors) and edges. Nodes contain “either of the individuals who mobilize or sympathize with a certain cause or subscribe to certain alternative lifestyles, or of the organizations that promote collective action on such issues or encourage alternative cultural practices.”¹⁰⁸ Edges refer to some forms of relationship that consist of either direct or indirect ties. Direct ties mean two nodes are directly connected by some specific criteria, whereas indirect ties indicate two nodes have no direct relationship but are linked by a third party.¹⁰⁹

Social networks have received the attention of scholars interested in studies on social movements since the 1960s.¹¹⁰ There are many studies attesting to the role of social networks in mobilizing people to engage in collective action.¹¹¹ For example, McAdam

¹⁰⁶ WanShiou Yang et al., "Mining Social Networks for Targeted Advertising" paper presented at the Proceedings of the 39th Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS06), 04 -07 Jan 2006.

¹⁰⁷ Grzegorz Kukła et al., "Recommendation Boosted Query Propagation in the Social Network," *Social Informatics* (2010).

¹⁰⁸ Mario Diani, "Networks and Social Movements," *Wiley Online Library*, 2015, accessed Mar 22, 2018, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeoss162.pub2>.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Mario Diani and Doug McAdam, *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹¹¹ Scott D. Mcclurg, "Social Networks and Political Participation: The Role of Social Interaction in Explaining Political Participation," *Political Research Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (2003); David A. Snow, Louis A. Zurcher Jr, and Sheldon Ekland-Olson, "Social Networks and Social Movements: A Microstructural Approach to Differential Recruitment," *American sociological review* (1980); Doug McAdam, "Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer," *American Journal of Sociology* 92, no. 1 (1986); R.D. Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons from Eastern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2001); Gerald Marwell, Pamela E. Oliver, and Ralph Prahl, "Social Networks and Collective Action: A Theory of the Critical Mass. Iii," *American Journal of Sociology* 94, no. 3 (1988).

finds that social ties had a significant role in mobilizing young students to participate in the Freedom Summer Project in 1964.¹¹² Snow et al. argue that social ties are useful to recruit new members into the movements, and most of the recruits are mobilized through pre-existing social networks.¹¹³ McClurg declares that individuals' interaction in social networks, like political discussion, has a strong effect over the inclination to participate in political action.¹¹⁴ In a similar vein, McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald claim that "the greater the density of social organization, the more likely that social movement activity will develop."¹¹⁵ Opp points out that "the integration of individuals into social networks promotes their protest participation."¹¹⁶ Ghannam declares that social networks, in the Arab world, "inform, mobilize, entertain, create communities, increase transparency, and seek to hold governments accountable."¹¹⁷

Furthermore, scholars have illuminated the mechanisms of social networks for influencing individuals' participation activities. Social networks serve as a channel of information dissemination, especially in non-democratic countries. For example, Osa and Schock point out that social networks are a substitute for official media to spread uncensored information in authoritarian regimes.¹¹⁸ In addition, social networks facilitate the formation of collective identities. Taylor and Whittier show that strong bonds

¹¹² Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (Oxford University Press, 1990).

¹¹³ Snow, Zurcher Jr, and Ekland-Olson, "Social Networks and Social Movements: A Microstructural Approach to Differential Recruitment."

¹¹⁴ McClurg, "Social Networks and Political Participation: The Role of Social Interaction in Explaining Political Participation."

¹¹⁵ Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, "Social Movements," in *Handbook of Sociology*, ed. Neil J. Smelser (SAGE Publications, 1988), 703.

¹¹⁶ Opp, *Theories of Political Protest and Social Movements: A Multidisciplinary Introduction, Critique, and Synthesis*, 135.

¹¹⁷ Jeffrey Ghannam, *Social Media in the Arab World: Leading up to the Uprisings of 2011* (Washington: Center for International Media Assistance, 2011), https://www.cima.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/CIMA-Arab_Social_Media-Report-10-25-11.pdf.

¹¹⁸ Osa and Schock, "A Long, Hard Slog: Political Opportunities, Social Networks and the Mobilization of Dissent in Non-Democracies."

in social networks give rise to the formation of collective identities.¹¹⁹ Passy argues that “once individuals have been integrated into formal or informal networks, they find themselves in an interactive structure that enables them to define and redefine their interpretive frames, facilitates the process of identity-building and identity strengthening, and creates or solidifies political consciousness towards a given protest issue.”¹²⁰ Generally speaking, social networks can link prospective participants together and enhance interaction among them to form a sense of collective identity. Encouraged by collective identity, people are then likely to engage in the collective action that may increase the group’s well-being.

This thesis uses online social networks to replace information flows and social networks as one element in the online model of POS. This is because, in cyberspace, online social networks can perform the same functions as the other two elements. As indicated above, people who want to hold a political protest in non-democratic countries will run into greater difficulty than in democracies in spreading information quickly and widely. Online social networks can perform a function as transmission paths on which information flows from the sources to hundreds of millions of nodes. As long as there are extensive online social networks available to online protesters, it is not necessary for them to depend on news coverage to disseminate information and attract public attention. With the increasing popularity of the Internet and the rapid development of internet technologies, various online social networks have become easily available. Social networking websites such as Twitter, YouTube, Google+, and Facebook, enable users to easily release, search, replicate, and alter not only textual information but also video and audio. Consequently, information can flow more openly and smoothly. It is fair to say that

¹¹⁹ Verta Taylor and Nancy E. Whittier, "Collective Identity in Social Movement Communities: Lesbian Feminist Mobilization," in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*. (New Haven, CT, US: Yale University Press, 1992), 169-87.

¹²⁰ Florence Passy, "Social Networks Matter. But How?," in *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective* ed. Doug McAdam and Mario Diani (Oxford University Press, 2003), 21-43.

putting information online is likely to drastically bring down the cost of information diffusion, which may create favorable conditions for political mobilization.

More importantly, online social networks help to improve interpersonal interaction. Internet users are able to interact with each other directly and instantaneously through online social networks. Put differently, online social networks can facilitate the discussion and interaction among dispersed netizens, thereby facilitating the formation of collective identity based on common beliefs, interests, and opinions. In short, in terms of online political protests, online social networks have a dual role: to strengthen social ties between protesters on the one hand and to facilitate the dissemination of information on the other. Consequently, there is no need to list information flows as an independent element of the online model of POS.

Although most of the western social media websites have been blocked in China, domestic social media websites, such as Sina Weibo and WeChat, are enormously popular. By using these services, Chinese users have established their online social networks and increasingly depend on online social networks to extend and maintain social relationships. Online social networks create a new channel for protesters to rapidly distribute information. Additionally, online social networks among members of aggrieved populations facilitate internal communication, which is useful to coordinate efforts, pool resources, and develop collective identities. In Chapter 3, the thesis will detail the profound implications of online social networks for online political protests in China.

2.3.4 Influential Allies

Influential allies are those individuals or organizations outside the government that have significant influence and can provide support to online political protests. According to Osa and Schock, influential allies can encourage individuals to take part in various forms of protests by offering economic support, organizational expertise, or leadership to reduce

the resource gap between challengers and government.¹²¹ However, Osa and Schock point out that common influential allies in democratic countries, like trade unions and professional associations, can hardly play their roles in non-democracies.¹²² This is because, in non-democratic countries, some of these social organizations do not exist at all; besides, even if some exist, they are, in no small degree, under the control of the government.¹²³ For instance, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (中华全国总工会) is the only union federation in China. All trade unions are affiliated to the All-China Federation of Trade Unions. All independent trade unions and other such organizations by workers are not legally recognized.¹²⁴ Bai argues that the All-China Federation of Trade Unions has become an organ of the CCP and failed to serve as a real trade union to protect workers' legitimate rights and interests.¹²⁵

Nevertheless, there remain other organizations that can provide support for challengers. Many scholars argue that social organizations, like religious organizations, human rights organizations, research institutions, consumer organizations, non-governmental organizations, may provide crucial support for the political mobilization in authoritarian countries.¹²⁶ For example, Osa and Schock find that international allies can play a vital role in political mobilization in non-democratic countries.¹²⁷ When the government begins to suppress protests, protesters can seek international allies, which may put pressure on their states from outside, which helps to reduce the power disparity between

¹²¹ Osa and Schock, "A Long, Hard Slog: Political Opportunities, Social Networks and the Mobilization of Dissent in Non-Democracies."

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ruixue Bai, "The Role of the All China Federation of Trade Unions: Implications for Chinese Workers Today," *WorkingUSA* 14, no. 1 (2011).

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, "Transnational Advocacy Networks in International and Regional Politics," *International Social Science Journal* 51, no. 159 (1999); Brian Martin, Wendy Varney, and Adrian Vickers, "Political Jiu-Jitsu against Indonesian Repression: Studying Lower-Profile Nonviolent Resistance," *Pacifica Review: Peace, Security & Global Change* 13, no. 2 (2001).

¹²⁷ Osa and Schock, "A Long, Hard Slog: Political Opportunities, Social Networks and the Mobilization of Dissent in Non-Democracies."

the government and challengers.¹²⁸ In a similar vein, Keck and Sikkink argue that international allies are capable of providing access, leverage, resources, and information for activists in non-democratic states.

As for China's online political protest, many Chinese internet celebrities (also known as social media influencers) are likely to become online protesters' allies. China's social media influencers consist of famous scholars, successful businessmen, entertainment stars, popular bloggers, and so forth. They often have high credibility, attract a great number of followers, and can influence their followers' decisions and positions. Many scholars find that China's social media influencers have an important role in online political protests. Tong and Lei argue that, in microblog-based internet protests, some social media influencers may become "temporary opinion leaders" of online protesters.¹²⁹ They find that internet users tend to accept opinion leaders' attitudes on a given issue and use the repost function of social media to diffuse these positions, which may finally become public opinion and determine the direction of online protests.¹³⁰

China's social media influencers do not have a unified ideology. Instead, their ideologies are pluralistic, such as US Lovers (美粉), Mao Lovers (毛粉), Democratizers (自由派), Humanists (全球派), Market Lovers (新自由派), Equality Advocates (新左派), Traditionalists (新儒家), China Advocates (中国模式派), Flag Wavers (愤青), Industrialists (工业党), and Party Warriors (自干五).¹³¹ Thus, no matter which social issues China's internet users attempt to protest against, it is possible for them to find influential allies. In addition, China's NGOs and commercial media outlets are two groups

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Yanqi Tong and Shaohua Lei, "Creating Public Opinion Pressure: Large-Scale Internet Protests," in *Social Protest in Contemporary China, 2003-2010: Transitional Pains and Regime Legitimacy* (Taylor & Francis, 2013), 158-60.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ For more information, see Kristin Shi-Kupfer et al., *Ideas and Ideologies Competing for China's Political Future* (Mercator Institute for China Studies, 2017), <http://www.merics.org/cn/node/4136>.

of organizations that may become online protesters' allies. In Chapter 3, the thesis will present a detailed discussion of online protesters' allies in China's cyberspace.

In summary, the thesis has put forward the online model of POS to study online political protests in China. It has identified the four elements of the POS: elite divisions, internet control, and online social networks, influential allies. It argues that those elements have a decisive part in facilitating the emergence and development of online political protests in China.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has laid a theoretical foundation for the study of online political protest in China. It commences with the introduction of the development of social movement theories. Olson's collective action theory has great significance because it transferred the theoretical paradigm from psychologically rooted explanations to rationally grounded interpretations. The chapter also has provided a detailed introduction to the POS theory. The POS is referred to as dimensions of the political environment or of change in that environment that provide incentives for people to participate in collective action by influencing their expectations for success or failure. The incentives contain economic and non-economic incentives. Economic incentives refer to tangible resources, such as money and goods, whereas non-economic incentives are intangible mental inducements.

This thesis proposes a modified model of POS to examine online political protests in China. This chapter has identified the four key elements of the POS: elite divisions, internet control, online social networks, and influential allies. Divided elites imply that political elites of an authoritarian regime may have disagreements with a given political issue and signal that protesters may get official endorsements from parts of political elites. Internet control is an important method employed by the Chinese government to undermine people's incentives to participate in the political life of society, thereby

impeding or preventing collective protests. However, China's internet control has some radicalizing effects on internet users' protest behavior and is prone to be arbitrary and capricious. Competing bureaucratic interests of internet regulatory agencies and commercial interests of China's web companies render internet control incoherent and capricious. Often, censoring rules are changeable, and the extent of internet control fluctuates. This encourages individuals to participate in online political protest. Online social networks function by facilitating information dissemination and enhancing networks of social relations. Online activists can spread information and build collective identity through online social networks, thereby recruiting more participants. Influential allies can facilitate political protests by helping correct the resource imbalance between challengers and government. They can provide material assistance and expertise for resource-poor protests and influence their decisions. Social media influencers, commercial media outlets, and NGOs are likely to become online protesters' allies.

Chapter 3: Elite Divisions, Online Social Networks, and Influential Allies

Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 seek to explain the online model of the POS in detail. The two chapters lay a foundation for the empirical analysis presented in Chapters 5 to 7. This chapter aims at analyzing the first three elements of the POS for China's online political protest, namely elite divisions, online social networks, and influential allies. It also explains their implications for China's online political protests. The next chapter will proceed with the analysis of China's internet control, which is the fourth element of the POS.¹ This chapter argues that elite divisions, online social networks, and influential allies have essential roles in facilitating China's online political protests. In particular, Elite divisions between the central and local governments and those within the central government open possibilities for online protesters to obtain positive responses from some political elites at the central level. Social networks on Sina Weibo enable online protesters to diffuse information to the public cheaply and swiftly, facilitate the formation of collective identity, and improve the cooperation among online protesters. Influential allies, including influential individuals and organizations on Sina Weibo, can shape public opinion and influence internet users' decisions on whether to engage in online political protests.

This chapter is composed of four sections. In the first section, the author makes a detailed analysis of elite divisions related to China's online political protests. In order to understand the influence of China's social media, especially Sina Weibo, Section 3.2 introduces the rapid growth of the Internet and social media in China. Section 3.3 and 3.4 examine social networks and influential allies on Sina Weibo. Moreover, they explore

¹ China's internet control regime is highly complex, involving many state agencies and a series of measures. Due to limited space, Chapter Four will discuss it separately.

how these social networks and influential allies can facilitate China's online political protests. The final section provides a conclusion.

3.1 Elite Divisions in Relation to China's Online Political Protest

This section seeks to analyze elite divisions that China's internet users can exploit when holding political protests. As discussed in Chapter 2, elite divisions between the central and local governments and elite divisions within the central government are particularly important for online political protests. This section concentrates on examining these elite divisions and discussing how they facilitate online political protests in China.

3.1.1 Elite Divisions Between the Central and Local Governments

As indicated in Chapter 2, central political elites refer to party and state leaders and ministerial officials of central government departments. At the same time, political elites at local levels are local government leaders. Some conflicting interests between central and local political elites have caused the central-local elite divisions.

Central political elites, holding high office within the central government, have direct responsibility for sustaining the CCP's rule. To maintain the communist regime's political legitimacy is their paramount and shared interests. It is not difficult to understand, because, for any regime, political legitimacy is the solid foundation for its rule.² According to Weber, political legitimacy is "the basis of every system of authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, is a belief, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige."³ As argued by Dogan, "even the most tyrannical

² Max. Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, Talcott Parsons ed. (Free Press, 1997); Rodney Barker, *Political Legitimacy and the State* (Clarendon, 1990).

³ Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 382.

rulers try to justify their reign.”⁴ Mazepus et al. argue that the cornerstone of any political system is legitimacy and no regime or authority wishes to lose political legitimacy.⁵ It is arguable that the loss of political legitimacy can lead to the collapse of state power. Thus, any regime, as long as having rudimentary rationality, will make great efforts to acquire and maintain its political legitimacy.

Many observers argue that the CCP regime’s political legitimacy is a kind of performance legitimacy, which is based mainly on government performance. They find that economic performance is a main source of the Chinese government’s performance legitimacy.⁶ China’s leadership started to adopt economic performance as one cornerstone of political legitimacy in 1978. As the political chaos and deteriorating economy during the tragic decade of the Cultural Revolution had diminished the CCP’s political legitimacy, Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) decided to correct practices of the Cultural Revolution and concentrate on economic development.⁷ He explains that:

In a country as big and as poor as ours, if we do not try to increase production, how can we survive? How is socialism superior, when our people have so many difficulties in their lives?... by 1978 the average monthly salary for our workers was still only 45 Yuan, and most of our rural areas were still mired in poverty. Can

⁴ Mattei Dogan, "Conceptions of Legitimacy," in *Encyclopedia of Government and Politics*, ed. M.E. Hawkesworth and Maurice Kogan (London: Routledge, 2004), 110.

⁵ Honorata Mazepus et al., "A Comparative Study of Legitimation Strategies in Hybrid Regimes," *Policy Studies* 37, no. 4 (2016).

⁶ Dingxin Zhao, "The Mandate of Heaven and Performance Legitimation in Historical and Contemporary China," *American Behavioral Scientist* 53, no. 3 (2009); Yuchao Zhu, "'Performance Legitimacy' and China's Political Adaptation Strategy," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 16, no. 2 (2011); Hongxing Yang and Dingxin Zhao, "Performance Legitimacy, State Autonomy and China's Economic Miracle," *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 91 (2015); Philip P. Pan, *Out of Mao's Shadow: The Struggle for the Soul of a New China* (Simon & Schuster, 2008), 323; Michael G Roskin, *Countries and Concepts: Politics, Geography, Culture* (Pearson Education, 2015), 462; A. Laliberte and M. Lantegne, *The Chinese Party-State in the 21st Century: Adaptation and the Reinvention of Legitimacy* (Taylor & Francis, 2007), 8-14.

⁷ Xiaoping Deng, "We Shall Concentrate on Economic Development," *China Daily*, updated 20 Oct 2010, 1982, accessed 8 April, 2017, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpnationalcongress/2010-10/20/content_29714512.htm.

this be called the superiority of socialism? That is why I insisted that the focus of our work should be rapidly shifted to economic development.⁸

To rebuild political legitimacy, Deng attempted to shift the general line of CCP from “taking class struggle as the key link (以阶级斗争为纲)” to “taking economic construction as the central task (以经济建设为中心).”⁹ In other words, the CCP leadership started to adopt economic performance as the foundation for political legitimacy in 1978. Until now, the CCP has treated performance legitimacy as an important source of political stability. At the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping stresses that:

We must recognize that the evolution of the principal contradiction facing Chinese society does not change our assessment of the present stage of socialism in China. The basic dimension of the Chinese context—that our country is still and will long remain in the primary stage of socialism—has not changed [...] We must lead and unite the Chinese people of all ethnic groups in fulfilling the central task of economic development. We must uphold the Four Cardinal Principles, continue to reform and opening-up, be self-reliant, hardworking, and enterprising, and strive to build China into a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Bing Xue, Zhongming Liang, and Yabing Cheng, *Xing Zheng Xue Yuan Li (Principles of the Science of Public Administration)* (Tsinghua University Press, 2005), 50.

¹⁰ Jinping Xi, "决胜全面建成小康社会 夺取新时代中国特色社会主义伟大胜利—在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会上的报告 [Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era]," *Xinhuanet*, updated 27 Oct 2017, 2017, accessed 10 December, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/19cpcnc/2017-10/27/c_1121867529.htm.

In addition to economic performance, political performance is another source of the Chinese government's performance-based legitimacy.¹¹ One important dimension of China's political performance is to deliver social stability.¹² Since the Tiananmen Square event in 1989, the CCP leadership has been highly sensitive about China's stability.¹³ In June 1990, the Central Committee of the CCP issued the "Notice of the Central Committee of the CCP on Maintaining Social Stability and Strengthening Political-Legal Work" (中共中央关于维护社会稳定加强政法工作的通知), which emphasizes that preserving social stability is an overriding political task of the whole party and the people of the whole country.¹⁴ During the ten years of Hu Jintao's administration (2002-2012), stability maintenance (维稳) obtained extreme importance.¹⁵ At the 4th Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee of CCP in September 2004, the CCP issued "Decision of the Central Committee of the CCP on Strengthening the Construction of Governing Capacity (中共中央关于加强党的执政能力建设的决定)." The Decision by the CCP Central Committee listed "the capability of building a socialist harmonious society (构建社会主义和谐社会的能力)" as one of the most important governing capabilities that the CCP needs to improve; besides, it stressed that "maintaining social stability and unity is a prerequisite for everything else work and an inevitable requirement of building socialist

¹¹ Zhao, "The Mandate of Heaven and Performance Legitimation in Historical and Contemporary China."; Zhu, "'Performance Legitimacy' and China's Political Adaptation Strategy."; Yang and Zhao, "Performance Legitimacy, State Autonomy and China's Economic Miracle."; Pan, *Out of Mao's Shadow: The Struggle for the Soul of a New China*, 323; Roskin, *Countries and Concepts: Politics, Geography, Culture*, 462; Laliberte and Lantaigne, *The Chinese Party-State in the 21st Century: Adaptation and the Reinvention of Legitimacy*, 8-14.

¹² *The Chinese Party-State in the 21st Century: Adaptation and the Reinvention of Legitimacy*, 9; Zhu, "'Performance Legitimacy' and China's Political Adaptation Strategy."

¹³ Ruoyun Bai, *Contemporary Chinese Studies Series: Staging Corruption: Chinese Television and Politics* (University of British Columbia Press, 2014), 160-64.

¹⁴ The Central Committee of the CCP, "中共中央关于维护社会稳定加强政法工作的通知 [Notice of the Central Committee of the Ccp on Maintaining Social Stability and Strengthening Political-Legal Work]," *the Peoples Daily*, 1990, accessed 22 January, 2019, http://guoqing.china.com.cn/2012-09/13/content_26747851.htm.

¹⁵ Bai, *Contemporary Chinese Studies Series: Staging Corruption: Chinese Television and Politics*, 109.

harmonious society.”¹⁶ Moreover, at CCP’ 90th anniversary gathering on 1 July 2011, Hu Jintao emphasized that,

To strike a balance among reform, development, and stability and achieve unity of the three is an important guideline for achieving overall success in China’s socialist modernization. Development is critically important, and upholding stability is also a critically important task (发展是硬道理, 稳定是硬任务). Without stability, nothing could be done, and even the achievements already made could be lost. This is a lesson that all the comrades in the Party should keep in mind, and we should make all the people keep this lesson in mind.¹⁷

After Xi Jinping came to power, stability maintenance is still one core task of the central government.¹⁸ Stability maintenance has become an important official discourse. As a keyword, it often appears in the CCP leaders’ speeches and government documents.

All in all, the political legitimacy of the CCP’s rule mainly rests on government performance. The delivery of economic growth and social stability are core interests of the Chinese central government. Therefore, the central government often displays low tolerance for activities that are likely to cause damage to these two goals. Of course, the political performance also contains safeguarding national unity and strengthening national power,¹⁹ but they are not very relevant to the research of this thesis.

¹⁶ The Central Committee of the CCP, "中共中央关于加强党的执政能力建设的决定 [Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Strengthening the Construction of Governing Capacity]," (Beijing 2004).

¹⁷ Jintao Hu, "Speech by Hu Jintao at Ccps 90th Anniversary Gathering," *Xinhua News Agency*, 2011, accessed 5 March, 2019, http://www.china.org.cn/china/CPC_90_anniversary/2011-07/01/content_22901507.htm.

¹⁸ Susan L. Shirk, "China in Xi’s “New Era”: The Return to Personalistic Rule," *Journal of Democracy*, no. 2 (2018).

¹⁹ Zhu, "'Performance Legitimacy" and China’s Political Adaptation Strategy."; Laliberte and Lanteigne, *The Chinese Party-State in the 21st Century: Adaptation and the Reinvention of Legitimacy*; Roskin, *Countries and Concepts: Politics, Geography, Culture*.

To have a good understanding of the interests of local government leaders, it is necessary to introduce China's governmental decentralization. China has the world's largest population and fourth largest territory. China's size renders it difficult to govern so that China's central government has to delegate some political powers and duties to local governments. The government decentralization of the CCP regime can date back to Mao's decentralization policies during the "Great Leap Forward (1958–1961) (大跃进)" and the "Cultural Revolution" (1966–1976) (文化大革命).²⁰ During those periods, Mao delegated wide-ranging economic powers and resources to local governments as well as encouraged local governments to compete with each other.²¹

Following Mao's death, the reform and opening-up (改革开放) has given rise to the new wave of decentralization. Since the year of 1980, the CCP leadership has carried out a series of measures of fiscal decentralization (财政分权) to transfer some fiscal powers to local governments. During the period from 1980 to 1993, China's government adopted the fiscal responsibility system (财政包干制) to decentralize its highly centralized fiscal management system.²² The general principle of this system is:

The central government contracts out local fiscal revenues and expenditures to provincial financial units, entitling local governments to a pre-determined percentage of the surplus revenue. However, the central government will reduce

²⁰ Mingxing Liu, Victor Shih, and Dong Zhang, "The Fall of the Old Guards: Explaining Decentralization in China," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 53, no. 4 (2018); Susan L Shirk, *The Political Logic of Economic Reform in China*, vol. 24 (Univ of California Press, 1993); Feizhou Zhou and Mingzhi Tan, "Introduction: The Relationship between the Central Government and Local Governments," in *Relationship between the Central Government and Local Governments of Contemporary China* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2017).

²¹ Shirk, *The Political Logic of Economic Reform in China*, 24.

²² Chunli Shen, Jing Jin, and Heng-fu Zou, "Fiscal Decentralization in China: History, Impact, Challenges and Next Steps," *Annals of Economics & Finance* 13, no. 1 (2012).

the subsidy for unbalanced revenues and expenditures caused by a decline in revenues, or even offer no subsidy at all.²³

This fiscal responsibility system enabled local governments to have authority over revenues and expenditures, but it also caused several problems, such as the central government's widening budget deficit, growing regional fiscal disparities, and the decreasing capacity of macroeconomic regulation and control.²⁴ In order to address these issues, the central government decided to modify the fiscal decentralization.

Since 1994, the central government has introduced the tax sharing system (分税制) to replace the fiscal responsibility system. Under this new system, the central government takes away the majority of tax revenues.²⁵ It means that the new fiscal arrangement has strengthened the central government's fiscal control over localities. Nevertheless, the tax system reform, which is part of selective re-centralization, does not mean that the central government wanted to reverse government decentralization and return to the old situation before the reform and opening up.²⁶ The new system classified taxes into three groups: central taxes, local taxes, and taxes shared by the central and local governments; moreover, it allowed the localities to collect local taxes without interference from the central government.²⁷ In other words, the new system contributed to two independent systems for tax revenue: central taxes and local taxes. As for shared taxes, the central government was responsible for collecting them first and then sharing them with local governments.

²³ Zhou and Tan, "Fiscal Responsibility System."

²⁴ More details about issues brought about by the fiscal responsibility system, see: Shen, Jin, and Zou, "Fiscal Decentralization in China: History, Impact, Challenges and Next Steps."; Zhigang Yang, "中国财政体制改革：回顾和展望 [China's Fiscal System Reform: Review and Outlook]," *Peoples Daily Online*, 2003, accessed 25 Nov, 2008, <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/jinji/36/20030321/949785.html>; Zhou and Tan, "Fiscal Responsibility System."

²⁵ Becky P. Y. Loo and Sin Yin Chow, "China's 1994 Tax-Sharing Reforms: One System, Differential Impact," *Asian Survey* 46, no. 2 (2006).

²⁶ For more information about selective re-centralization, see Yongnian Zheng, *Contemporary China: A History since 1978* (Wiley, 2013), 139-61.

²⁷ Loo and Chow, "China's 1994 Tax-Sharing Reforms: One System, Differential Impact."

As a result, this institutional arrangement gives local governments incentives to raise local taxes and struggle for more distribution of shared taxes.

Apart from the fiscal decentralization, the administrative decentralization (行政分权) is another crucial facet of China's decentralization between the central government and its local representatives. The administrative decentralization refers to the transfer of some powers and responsibilities of public administration and public service delivery from the central government to its local representatives.²⁸ Since the reform and opening-up, China's central government has gradually devolved some administrative powers to local governments.²⁹ Within their jurisdictions, local governments are able to intervene in various economic activities, but, on the other hand, they are required to take more responsibility for providing public service, like education, health care, public transportation, and so forth.

The government decentralization has promoted the formation of local government leaders' independent interests. As mentioned above, the tax sharing system enables the central government to take away most of tax revenues (central tax, as discussed above) from local governments. However, the administrative decentralization requires local governments to deliver public services, such as health care, education, public transportation, to meet residents' needs. As noted by Winston Mok, a McKinsey consultant, "fundamental changes to the way China's central and local governments divide resources and responsibilities are long overdue. Local governments currently receive little more than half the fiscal revenue while being responsible for more than 80 percent of the

²⁸ Ka Ho Mok and Xiao Fang Wu, "Dual Decentralization in China's Transitional Economy: Welfare Regionalism and Policy Implications for Central-Local Relationship," *Policy and Society* 32, no. 1 (2013).

²⁹ Jianxing Yu and Xiang Gao, "重新界定分权: 浙江省县级政府行政权力扩张的历程 [Redefining Decentralization: Devolution of Administrative Authority to County Governments in Zhejiang Province]," *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 72, no. 3 (2013).

expenditure.”³⁰ The fact that local authorities get fewer resources but need to take more responsibilities has made many local governments face severe budget deficits.³¹ Although every year the central government pays subsidies to local governments with deficits and provides various grants to those whose proposals for economic development are approved,³² local governments need to raise local taxes by achieving local economic prosperity. This is because local authorities’ applications for a grant could be rejected by the central government; further, even if their applications are successful, the use of funds is often subject to certain restrictions imposed by the central government. What local government leaders want most are those government revenues without any restraint. Consequently, in order to raise fiscal revenue as much as possible, they have an overwhelming desire to develop the economy in their jurisdictions by various means, such as stimulating housing markets.

More importantly, the Chinese central government has adopted the rate of local economic growth as a critical factor of the government performance evaluation to determine local government officials’ promotion prospects.³³ This performance-based promotion, which aims to ensure the implementation of central economic policies, further motivates local government leaders to promote the development of the local economy. In many cases, local leaders’ enthusiasm for economic growth has become the blind pursuit of gross domestic product (GDP) growth, so that the news media often call it as “worship of

³⁰ Winston Mok, "Chinas Central and Local Governments Must Seek a Fairer Share of the Fiscal Burden," *South China Morning Post*, 2015, accessed 12 March, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1862356/chinas-central-and-local-governments-must-seek-fairer-share>.

³¹ Susan H. Whiting, *Central-Local Fiscal Relations in China*, National Committee on United States–China Relations & Renmin University of China (Beijing, 2007), https://www.ncusr.org/sites/default/files/page_attachments/Central-Local-Fiscal-Relations.pdf; Ho-Mou Wu and Shiliang Feng, "A Study of China’s Local Government Debt with Regional and Provincial Characteristics," *China Economic Journal* 7, no. 3 (2014).

³² Yongqiu Wu et al., "Transfer Payment Structure and Local Government Fiscal Efficiency: Evidence from China," *China Finance and Economic Review* 5, no. 1 (2017).

³³ Yijia Jing, Yangyang Cui, and Danyao Li, "The Politics of Performance Measurement in China," *Policy and Society* 34, no. 1 (2015).

GDP”³⁴ or “GDP fetishism.”³⁵ To maximize their own interests in the process of local governance, many local government leaders tend to stimulate the growth of local GDP at the expense of the environment and human rights. As a result, local government leaders’ blind pursuit of GDP growth often provokes widespread and leads to social instability. What is even worse is that some local government leaders exploit public powers and government resources for illegal personal benefits. The issue of mounting official corruption has become a matter of considerable public concern.

Besides, local government leaders distort the implementation of stability maintenance to some extent. To motivate local governments to place importance on maintaining social stability, the central government has used the ability of maintaining social stability a vital criterion of the cadre evaluation system to affect local officials’ promotion prospects.³⁶ Local government officials who are capable of keeping social unrest down to a minimum can obtain good opportunities for career advancement; also, those who fail to complete the goal of preserving stability may not get promoted or even lose their jobs. However, various social problems often interweave so inextricably that stability maintenance at local levels has become an onerous task.³⁷ Some local government leaders do not attempt to identify the root cause of instability; instead, to secure career advancement, they prone to maintain temporary or apparent stability by using violence to nip all kinds of social instability in the bud.³⁸ In other words, local government leaders tend to use high-handed

³⁴ Fu Man, "Ending Chinas Worship of Almighty Gdp," *Peoples Daily online* , 2011, accessed 10 July, 2017, <http://en.people.cn/90780/7570987.html>.

³⁵ Xianrong Yi, "China’s Gdp Worship Must Come to an End," *Global Times*, 2016, accessed 5 April, 2018, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/992931.shtml>.

³⁶ Yuhua Wang and Carl Minzner, "The Rise of the Chinese Security State," *The China Quarterly* 222 (2015); Yue Xie, "The Political Logic of Weiwen in Contemporary China," *Issues & Studies* 48, no. 3 (2012).

³⁷ Peoples Tribuens special planning group, "维稳: 异化与代价 [Stability Maintenance: Dissimilation and Cost]," *Peoples Tribune* 27 (2010); Anliang Huang, "地方领导如何应对 "维稳难" [How Do Local Government Leaders Deal with the Difficulties of Stability Maintenance]," *Leadership Science* 22 (2015).

³⁸ Peoples Tribuens special planning group, "维稳: 异化与代价 [Stability Maintenance: Dissimilation and Cost]."

means, even including illegal means, to quickly stifle dissent, especially those dissenting voices associated with their blind pursuit of GDP growth.

Worse still, stability maintenance has become a fig leaf for some local government leaders to conceal misconduct. Many observers have found that local government officials use stability maintenance as tools to cover up malpractices.³⁹ Local government leaders often resort to violence against people who attempt to disclose their misconduct.

In short, local government leaders are more concerned with regional development and personal career advancement. They tend to give top priority to career promotion. Sometimes, what lays beneath the surface of local governments' glossy GDP figures are human rights violations and serious environmental pollution, which is stirring up social unrest continuously. Besides, some local government leaders are willing to adopt high-handed approaches to quickly silence critics and suppress public opposition in the name of preserving stability. Local government officials' abusive or unjust exercise of power is a flagrant disregard for the rule of law. This substitution of unbridled power for the law has caused severe damage to social justice and become a source of social instability.

Unlike local government leaders, the Chinese central political elites need to think about the big picture. Their paramount interests are to legitimize and maintain the communist regime. They have placed a premium on political legitimacy—delivering economic growth and social stability. The central government devolves the responsibility of boosting the economy and preserving social stability to local governments. It wants local governments to ensure booming local economies and stable society rather than rising social instability. It is fair to say that local elites did not pay as much attention to the

³⁹ Jun Gao, "维稳“陷阱”及其破解之道 [the Trap of Stability Maintenance and Its Solution]," *Journal of Socialist Theory Guide* 11 (2011); Haifeng zhao, "“维稳”何时成了“遮羞布”？ [When Did "Maintenance" Become a "Fig Leaf"?]," *CPCNews*, 2010, accessed 08 July, 2019, <http://fanfu.people.com.cn/GB/64378/12683261.html>; Xing Xu, "维稳误区：异化与挑战 [Mistakes About Stability Maintenance: Dissimilation and Challenge]," *Peoples Tribune* 18 (2010).

maintenance of political legitimacy as central elites. As a result, elite divisions exist between the central and local governments.

Central-local elite divisions have given chances for individuals when staging online protests at local authorities and officials because they imply that political elites are likely to have different positions on an online political protest. Local governments often bear considerable hostility towards protests about their malpractices for fear that their wrongdoings, such as breaching the rules and infringing individual rights, will be exposed. China's central government, however, may have more tolerance towards an online political protest than its local representatives.

For one thing, the central government can make use of an online political protest to learn about popular discontent. Owing to multilevel government structures, top Chinese leadership have long been plagued by the issue of how to monitor the behavior of local governments.⁴⁰ Many local government officials make every endeavor to block and distort information regarding complaints and grievances that are related to their illegal or unethical conduct, with the result that it is difficult for the central government to detect their wrongdoings. If left unchecked, these deceptive practices could make the CCP's leadership uninformed about social tensions and individuals' grievances, which arouses people's doubts about the state's political legitimacy and may spark widespread social unrest at some unpredicted future point. Since ordinary citizens' acts of online protests can serve as a direct source of information about local social problems, the central government is likely to take advantage of them to break information blockades used by some local governments to evade supervision.

For another thing, the Chinese central government can gain popular support by giving responses to online protesters' appeals. The central government does turn a blind eye to

⁴⁰ Lianjiang Li, "Rights Consciousness and Rules Consciousness in Contemporary China," *The China Journal*, no. 64 (2010).

some violent conduct by local governments in maintaining stability. However, once local governments' acts of violence against private citizens spark public outrage, the central government may choose to evade responsibility and take advantage of opportunities to burnish its image by imposing penalties on some local government leaders. Furthermore, even if the central government tolerates some improper and aggressive conduct by local governments in the process of maintaining stability, it does not mean that the central government will allow local government leaders to misuse public powers and state resources for their private gain. If the central government can properly deal with corrupt officials disclosed by an online protest, citizens may feel that the central government is competent and effective. Thus, when attempting to expose local government officials' malpractice, online protesters are likely to meet with favorable reactions from the central government. For example, China's central media outlets, serving as the central government's mouthpiece, may condemn local government officials' misconduct. Generally speaking, the CCP's leaders can benefit from online political protests by acting as problem-solvers.

The possibility that the central government may give a response to an online political protest encourages online activists to give it a try. Moreover, the central government's endorsement can legitimize online activists' protest activities, which makes it impossible for local officials to take reprisals against protesters without scruple. Before making a retaliatory move against protesters, local governments need to consider the intensity and the legitimacy of measures they adopt. Thus, responses from the central government can reduce the risk of engaging in online political protests.

3.1.2 Elite Divisions Within the Central Government

Elite divisions exist within the Chinese central government. China's state authority is distributed among state ministries and commissions (国家部委) with different functional responsibilities. In other words, they are functionally parallel to each other. These central

government agencies are organized into hierarchical layers with subordinate agencies at local levels. Each ministry or commission is at the top of “a functionally-defined hierarchy of government units that exist at each territorial level of government.”⁴¹ However, some of these central government departments have overlapping roles and competing functions. For instance, the People’s Bank of China (中国人民银行) and the Ministry of Finance (财政部) often clash over the fiscal policy and policies on the nation’s economic restructuring.⁴² Also, China’s online game regulation has been a site of bureaucratic turf wars among the Ministry of Culture (文化部, MOC),⁴³ the General Administration of Press and Publication (新闻出版总署),⁴⁴ and the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (国家广播电影电视总局) since 2002.⁴⁵ Competing interests among different state ministries and commissions can create tensions among their government officials. Political elites standing for different central government departments may have disagreements on a given issue.

For online activists attempting to remonstrate with a central government department’s policy or its officials’ malpractices, they may obtain support from other central government departments. Moreover, although central political elites have direct responsibility for maintaining the regime’s political legitimacy, some of them may abuse

⁴¹ Kenneth Lieberthal, "China's Governing System and Its Impact on Environmental Policy Implementation," 1 (1997).

⁴² For more on the divisions between the People’s Bank of China and the Ministry of Finance, see Victor C. Shih, *Factions and Finance in China: Elite Conflict and Inflation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Stephen Bell, *The Rise of the Peoples Bank of China* (Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁴³ The MOC was dissolved on March 19, 2018, and its responsibilities were assumed by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (文化和旅游部).

⁴⁴ In March 2013, the General Administration of Press and Publication merged with State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television to form the State Administration of Press and Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (国家新闻出版广电总局, SAPPRFT). In March 2018, the SAPPRFT was abolished, and its functions of the movie, press and publication industry regulation were taken over by Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China (中宣部).

⁴⁵ For more information, see Jeff Grubb, "China's Game-Regulation Mess Is Starting to Hurt Developers," *venturebeat*, 2018, accessed 10 June, 2019, <https://venturebeat.com/2018/08/15/chinas-game-regulation-mess-is-starting-to-hurt-developers/>; Maeni, "中国网络游戏监管史 [the History of China's Online Game Regulation]," 2018, accessed 10 June, 2019, <https://www.gelonghui.com/p/206734>.

powers for personal benefits. Once their corrupt practices are exposed by online protesters to the public, top leaders may make responses to their scandals.

To conclude, political elites holding office in the Chinese central government are chiefly responsible for maintaining the political legitimacy of the regime. They attempt to retain and legitimate the authoritarian regime by putting in excellent government performance, including building a buoyant economy and a stable society. By contrast, political elites within China's local governments pay more attention to personal career advancement than the political legitimacy of the CCP's rule. At times, local government leaders would not scruple to trample on the interests and rights of ordinary people if they can sustain rapid GDP growth and ostensible social stability in their jurisdictions. Deliberate wrongdoing by government officials can fuel citizens' mistrust against the Chinese government and undermine the CCP's political legitimacy. Dissensions on the importance of maintaining the regime's political legitimacy exist between the central governments and its local representatives, which opens up possibilities for holding online protests at local governments and officials. In addition, there also exist elite divisions within the central government. These divisions imply that support and protection within the central government may be available to individuals or groups who wish to protest at central government departments policies and their officials.

3.2 The Development of the Internet and Social Media in China

Before proceeding further, this section will introduce internet development in China and the rise of China's social media so as to gain a better understanding of the formation of online social networks and influential allies. Moreover, this section explains why the thesis focuses on political protests on Sina Weibo. The Internet was introduced to China over 30 years ago. Since the 1990s, a number of excellent internet companies have emerged in China. These internet companies are always at the forefront of commercializing new information technologies. They have made substantial

contributions to the popularization of social media in China. Now, China's social media have become an inexpensive and effective channel for netizens to interact with each other, which creates favorable conditions for online political protests.

3.2.1 The Internet in China and the Rise of Chinese Internet Companies

The Internet is considered to be “a computer system that allows millions of computer users around the world to exchange information.”⁴⁶ On 24 October 1995, the Federal Networking Council passed a resolution defining the term,

“Internet” refers to the global information system that—(i) is logically linked together by a globally unique address space based on the Internet Protocol (IP) or its subsequent extensions/follow-ons; (ii) is able to support communications using the Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP) suite or its subsequent extensions/follow-ons, and/or other IP-compatible protocols; and (iii) provides, uses or makes accessible, either publicly or privately, high-level services layered on the communications and related infrastructure described herein.⁴⁷

The internet was invented by scientists in the early 1960s who believed that there would be great potential value once computers were connected to share data in scientific and military fields.⁴⁸ The Internet, which was then known as “ARPANet” (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network), was brought online in 1969 under a project led by the US military, and it initially connected four major computers at universities in the

⁴⁶ Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online, "The Internet," accessed 3 September, 2017, <https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/the-internet>.

⁴⁷ Federal Networking Council, Internet Monthly Reports (1995), <https://www.cs.columbia.edu/~hgs/internet/definition.html>.

⁴⁸ Barry M. Leiner et al., Brief History of the Internet (Internet Society, 1997), <https://www.internetsociety.org/internet/history-internet/brief-history-internet/>.

southwestern US: the University of California at Los Angeles, Stanford Research Institute, UC Santa Barbara, and the University of Utah.⁴⁹ It grew rapidly over the following years.

Probably the best-known and most significant invention is the “world wide web” (commonly known as the “web”).⁵⁰ In 1989, the web was invented by Tim Berners-Lee, a British scientist at the European Organization for Nuclear Research.⁵¹ The advent of the web represented a milestone in the development of the Internet, and its user-friendliness contributed to the boom of the Internet. The web immeasurably changed the ways in which people communicate and conduct business. Contemporary web browsers, like Microsoft’s Internet Explorer, Mozilla Firefox, Opera, Apple’s Safari, and Google Chrome, enable users to access, retrieve and view computer information, including graphics, sounds, text, video, and multimedia.

The Internet has developed at a rapid rate over the past three decades in China. In April 1994, China was officially recognized as the 77th country with fully functional internet accessibility.⁵² One year later, China Telecom started to provide internet access services for society.⁵³ According to the 42nd Statistical Report on Internet Development in China released by CNNIC, as of 30 June 2018, there were 802 million internet users in China and the internet penetration rate had reached 57.7 percent. China has the largest online population in the world.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ The World Wide Web (WWW, or simply Web) is a system of interlinked hypertext documents accessed via the Internet. For more information, See <http://www.w3.org/Help/#webinternet>

⁵¹ Barry M. Leiner et al., "Brief History of the Internet."

⁵² Qiu, "The Internet in China: Data and Issues."

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ The China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), "第 42 次中国互联网络发展状况统计报告 [the 42nd Statistical Report on Internet Development in China]," 2018, accessed 1 November, 2018, http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwzxbg/hlwtjbg/201808/t20180820_70488.htm.

The Chinese government is a great driving force behind China's internet popularization. The reason lies in the Internet's profound implication for economic growth. After the reform and opening up, the CCP leadership placed a premium on scientific and technological advances. They used ICTs as one of the tools to stimulate the development of China's economy and maintain the regime's political legitimacy.⁵⁵ Since the mid-1980s, the Chinese government has launched a series of projects to improve the country's internet infrastructure.⁵⁶ In 1993, the then Vice-Premier, Zhu Rongji (朱镕基), proposed "Three Golden Projects."⁵⁷ These projects included the Golden Bridge Project (金桥工程), the Golden Card Project (金卡工程), and the Golden Gate Project (金关工程), which represented the Chinese government's efforts to accelerate the systematic construction of nationwide IT infrastructure.⁵⁸ Among them, the Golden Bridge Project aimed to build the infrastructure of national economy informatization and to establish a processing platform for the other two projects.

From 1994 to 2000, the Chinese government set up seven national backbone networks in succession, including CSTNet (中国科技网), CERNet (中国国教育与科研网), CHINANet (中国公用计算机互联网), UNINet (中国联通互联网), CMNet (中国国移动互联网), CGWNet (中国长城互联网), CIETNet (中国国际电子商务网). CSTNet is a non-profit, public network, which mainly provides internet access services for scientific and technical institutions as well as technology-related government departments. CERNet mainly offers internet access services for Colleges, universities, and education authorities. CHINANet is one of the Chinese government's major data networks and serves as a wholesale internet access provider as well as a brand name for the provincial telecommunications administrations to provide their retail internet access service. UNINet and CMNet are in the charge of state-owned telecommunications operators,

⁵⁵ Zheng, *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State, and Society in China*, 24-26.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁷ OECD, *Governance in China* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2005), 150.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 150-53.

China Unicom (中国联通) and China Mobile (中国移动) respectively. CGWNet is controlled by a military-owned telecommunications company. CIETNet was operated and managed by the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation (MFTEC).⁵⁹ All of China's backbone networks are under the direct control of the Chinese central government.

Apart from efforts to improve internet infrastructure, the Chinese government also began to allow the private sector to invest in the internet industry. After the reform and opening up, the Chinese government attempted to transfer China's pure socialist public-ownership economy to a socialist market economy by promoting the diversification of ownership and the marketization of the economy. Chinese authorities started to allow the private sector to expand and encourage market mechanisms to play a role in the allocation of social resources since the 1990s.⁶⁰ It was during that period that China's internet companies began to develop. For example, in 1998, Sina (新浪), Sohu (搜狐), Tencent (腾讯), JD.com (京东) were open for business. One year later, Alibaba (阿里巴巴) was established by Jack Ma, followed by Baidu (百度) founded in 2000. Now, Tencent is the number one internet company in China, followed by Alibaba, Baidu, and JD.com.⁶¹ By 14 October 2018, the four biggest Chinese internet companies ranked third, fifth, eighth, and tenth place on the list of the world's largest internet companies based on market capitalization.⁶² According to a report from the McKinsey Global Institute—China's digital economy: A leading global force, China is a global leader in e-commerce and

⁵⁹ In 2003, the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation underwent a restructuring and was integrated into the Ministry of Commerce.

⁶⁰ Yongnian Zheng, *De Facto Federalism in China*, De Facto Federalism in China (World Scientific).

⁶¹ Chinadaily, "Top 10 Chinese Internet Companies in 2017," 2017, accessed 25 March, 2018, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2017top10/2017-10/16/content_33308079.htm.

⁶² Shobhit Seth, "Worlds Top 10 Internet Companies," *Investopedia*, 2018, accessed 12 December, 2018, <https://www.investopedia.com/articles/personal-finance/030415/worlds-top-10-internet-companies.asp>.

digital payments.⁶³ The rapid development of internet companies has laid the foundation for the popularity of social media in China.

It is worth mentioning that the geographical distribution of China's internet companies is extremely uneven. Most of China's biggest internet firms are located in Beijing's Zhongguancun (中关村), often known as "China's Silicon Valley." Zhongguancun is China's first high-technology industry development experimental zone and the birthplace of China's Internet.⁶⁴ In 2018, nearly 50 percent of the Top 100 Chinese internet Companies were located in Beijing, and seven of the top 10 most valuable Chinese internet companies were in Beijing.⁶⁵ Their geographical location implies that local governments, except for the Beijing government, have limited power over China's internet industry.

3.2.2 Social Media and the Advent of Sina Weibo

Social media is one of the most critical applications of social networking technologies. Nevertheless, there is no standard definition of the term. In practice, the terms "social media," "social network sites," and "social networking platform" are often interchangeable. According to Chandler and Munday, social media refers to:

Online and mobile technologies or platforms people use to interact and share content, including social networking sites, social bookmarking and social news sites, geosocial networking sites, blogs, online forums, file-sharing and media-

⁶³ Jonathan Woetzel et al., *China's Digital Economy: A Leading Global Force* (McKinsey Global Institute, 2017), <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/china/chinas-digital-economy-a-leading-global-force>.

⁶⁴ Jing Meng, "Zhongguancun: Beijing's Innovation Hub Is at the Centre of China's Aim to Become a Tech Powerhouse," *South China Morning Post*, 2018, accessed 25 July, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/tech/start-ups/article/2172713/zhongguancun-beijings-innovation-hub-centre-chinas-aim-become-tech>.

⁶⁵ Chinadaily, "Top 10 Most Valuable Internet Companies in China," 2019, accessed 6 May, 2019, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201904/16/WS5cb50840a3104842260b6553_9.html.

sharing sites, social gaming sites, social commerce sites, virtual worlds, and wikis.⁶⁶

After examining definitions provided in the literature, Obar and Wildman identify four features of social media:

social media services are (currently) Web 2.0 internet-based applications; user-generated content is the lifeblood of social media; individuals and groups create user-specific profiles for a site or app designed and maintained by a social media service; social media services facilitate the development of social networks online by connecting a profile with those of other individuals and/or groups.⁶⁷

Social media has evolved since the invention of the Internet. It started with Usenet in 1979, which enabled individuals to communicate through a virtual newsletter, articles, or posts to newsgroups.⁶⁸ However, the first recognizable social network website was Six Degrees.com, which was created in 1997 and continued to exist until 2000.⁶⁹ Six Degrees enabled users to create profiles, organize groups, invite friends, and browse other user profiles. From Six Degrees, social media began to grow in popularity.

The “golden era” of social media began in 2001.⁷⁰ Websites like Wikipedia, Friendster, Hi5, Myspace, Facebook, and Twitter were launched in the early 2000s. Among them, Facebook and Twitter are two notable examples. Facebook and Twitter were launched in

⁶⁶ Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, "Social Media," in *A Dictionary of Social Media* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁶⁷ Jonathan A Obar and Steven S Wildman, "Social Media Definition and the Governance Challenge: An Introduction to the Special Issue," *Telecommunications Policy* 39, no. 9 (2015).

⁶⁸ Simplify360, "How Social Media Made It Bigger by the Day," 2015, accessed 2 July, 2018, <http://simplify360.com/blog/social-media-made-bigger-day/>.

⁶⁹ Danah M. Boyd and Nicole B. Ellison, "Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13, no. 1 (2007).

⁷⁰ Ibid.

2004 and 2006 respectively, and they soon became the social media giants. Facebook and Twitter are now used for various purposes in many scenarios. They have affected the daily lives and activities of people in various ways by providing new methods for them to share and communicate with each other. For example, no matter where he/she is, as long as the Internet is available there, Facebook and Twitter enable him/her to use computers or smartphones to ceaselessly keep in touch with colleagues, friends and other acquaintances.

Chinese internet companies have been keen to promote the applications of internet technologies and have contributed to the popularity of social media. The landscape of Chinese social media, however, is distinctly different from the rest of the world. Popular websites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are banned in China, and many Chinese equivalents were created and took the opportunity to blossom. Although various social media websites spring out one after another, Sina Weibo (新浪微博, the equivalent of Facebook and Twitter combined) is one of the most influential social media platforms in China. Weibo literally means micro-blog. There used to be many other micro-blogging sites in China, including Tencent Weibo (腾讯微博), Wangyi Weibo (网易微博), and Sohu Weibo (搜狐微博). However, they never gained significant market share and were eliminated by the competition soon. Only Sina Weibo continues to exist up to now.

Sina Weibo was launched in 2009, three years after Twitter. It can be accessed via computers and mobile phones and is an open social communication platform. Even though an internet user does not have an account on Weibo, he/she can still view any Sina Weibo user's posts, comments, and likes. Furthermore, after registering their Sina Weibo accounts, users can follow other accounts without sending friend requests. This means that users can search out people in whom they are interested and build follower relations by simply clicking the "follow" button. For example, many users take to following influential Sina Weibo accounts, such as celebrities and experts to track breaking news and acquire special skills or knowledge. Countless networks of follower relations exist on Sina Weibo. To a large extent, Sina Weibo itself is a vast online social network. Kantar,

a research institute, finds that 35.7 percent of Chinese netizens were Sina Weibo users by April 2017.⁷¹

WeChat (微信, an equivalent of WhatsApp), launched by Tencent in 2011, was another popular Chinese social media in China. Currently, WeChat and Sina Weibo dominate the Chinese social media landscape. WeChat is developed as a mobile messaging app to message people over an internet connection. Unlike Sina Weibo, WeChat places more emphasis on one-to-one communication and is more suitable for private chats. In many cases, friend confirmation is necessary to establish friendships in WeChat. It is sort of like a close social communication platform, with a higher level of privacy than Sina Weibo. Therefore, it is much harder to build up follower relations on WeChat than Sina Weibo. In addition, WeChat users can only see posts published by official accounts to which they subscribe and posts on their friends' moments (朋友圈).⁷² It is fair to say that online social networks on WeChat are mainly based on innumerable networks of friendships.

This thesis concentrates on political protests on Sina Weibo. This is because Sina Weibo, based on the networks of follower relations, is more open than WeChat, which rests on the ties of friendships. Due to its openness, Sina Weibo has emerged as a popular platform for ordinary citizens to discuss noteworthy events that are happening across the country. As argued by Hu Yong, professor of journalism at Peking University, Sina Weibo has become the most prominent place for China's netizens to discuss public affairs and express opinions.⁷³ Additionally, Sina Weibo's openness makes it possible for scholars to directly observe online activists' collective acts of protests. Therefore, this research is mainly based on Sina Weibo.

⁷¹ KANTAR, China Social Media Impact Report 2017-Growth in the Social Media Era (2017), http://download.cicdata.com/upload/Kantar/EN-Kantar_Social_Media_Impact_Report_2017.pdf.

⁷² For more information about WeChat moments, see <http://tips.wechat.com/posts/2721.html>

⁷³ Keith B. Richburg, "In China, Microblogging Sites Become Free-Speech Platform," *The Washington Post*, 2011, accessed 17 July, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-china-microblogging-sites-become-free-speech-platform/2011/03/22/AFcsxlkB_story.html?noredirect=on.

3.2.3 Key Technical Characteristics of Sina Weibo

In order to have a good understanding of how online social networks and influential allies facilitate online political protests, this section elaborates several key technical characteristics of Sina Weibo, which have important roles in speeding up information dissemination and enhancing the interaction between users. Firstly, follower relations on Sina Weibo are fundamental to information dissemination. Information diffusion on Sina Weibo interweaves tightly with follower relations. In other words, follower networks serve as networks of information transmission. For example, if Sina Weibo user A makes a post, the post will appear on his/her followers' timelines by default. Moreover, information diffusion continuously happens through reposting. Sina Weibo allows user A's followers to make comments on, give likes to, and repost the post. Once one of user A's followers reposts the post, the same process will occur. It implies that by follower relations, A's post is distributed beyond his/her immediate followers. By virtue of this spreading mechanism, information can flow continuously.

Secondly, Sina Weibo allows information to flow in both directions between users through follower relations. When a follower wants to express an opinion on a post, he/she can make comments on it and reply to others' comments below it. In other words, users can interact with one another below a post. It is arguable that Sina Weibo has changed information diffusion by providing users with a new means to send and receive information—that is, many-to-many communication. Unlike traditional media, such as television, radio, and newspaper, which are designed to diffuse information in a one-way direction—from one sender to many recipients, many-to-many communication enables users to exchange points of view, experiences, and feelings simultaneously.

Thirdly, Sina Weibo enables users to become news makers rather than merely information consumers. Like most social media websites, Weibo is also quite user-friendly towards

“User Generated Content” (UGC hereafter).⁷⁴ Many Weibo users’ posts are original content rather than news from official media. China’s official media used to be the only source of news for the Chinese people. The production of news is in a highly professional way in terms of the process. Teams of highly trained media professionals are information producers, taking responsibility for collecting information and writing news. Also, official news organizations always have gatekeepers, such as supervisors and editors, who filter information and determine what news can be published to the masses and what information should be blocked.⁷⁵ If wanting to publish a story, ordinary people first need to attract a journalist’s attention and then get the approval of an editor. In other words, their stories can hardly receive coverage if they do not arouse gatekeepers’ interest or conform to gatekeepers’ political stance. However, Sina Weibo has blurred the boundary between media audiences and news producers. Users can post what they see and hear without requiring the approval of journalists and editors. Therefore, Sina Weibo has become an important channel to access information that does not receive coverage from official traditional media.

Finally, Sina Weibo allows the creation and dissemination of UGC in various formats, such as texts, photos, videos, and music. Sina Weibo users can express their points of view and emotions through different forms of online information, especially videos and images. Visual content is highly beneficial to disseminate information. On the one hand, the reason lies in the way the human brain works. Half of the human brain is directly or indirectly devoted to processing visual information.⁷⁶ The visual cortex, a specific part of our brains, works together with other segments of the brain to process various elements of visual information, including size, shape, color, and orientation (vertical or horizontal);

⁷⁴ UGC refers to the various forms of media content that are publicly available and created by end-users. See Andreas M Kaplan and Michael Haenlein, "Users of the World, Unite! The Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media," *Business horizons* 53, no. 1 (2010).

⁷⁵ Pamela J. Shoemaker and Timothy Vos, *Gatekeeping Theory* (Taylor & Francis, 2009), 22-25.

⁷⁶ MIT Research, "Brain Processing of Visual Information," *MIT NEWS*, 1996, accessed Mar 18, 2018, <http://news.mit.edu/1996/visualprocessing>.

instead, there is no specialized counterpart to deal with textual information.⁷⁷ As a result, the great majority of people respond much better to visual information compared to just textual information. For example, when he/she is browsing websites or reading books, visual content enables his/her brain to process information with more ease than textual content does. Statistical data also has proven the fact. Cooper finds that tweets with embedded visuals obtain 18 percent more clicks, 150 percent more retweets, and 89 percent more favorites.⁷⁸ According to Lee, visual content is 40 times more likely to be shared on social media than other kinds of content.⁷⁹ It is fair to say that the human brain is mainly an image processor and tends to prefer visuals to text.

On the other hand, visual content is effective in spreading sharp emotions, like anger, enthusiasm, fear, sadness, and so on. A large body of research has indicated that imagery has intimate relations with emotion.⁸⁰ For instance, Holmes and Mathews claim that imagery can trigger emotion in at least three ways:

A direct influence on emotional systems in the brain that is responsive to sensory signals; overlap between processes involved in mental imagery and perception which can lead to responding “as if” to real emotion-arousing events; and the

⁷⁷ D. J. Felleman, "Visual System in the Brain," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, ed. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (Oxford: Pergamon, 2001); Lee Ann Remington, "Visual Pathway," in *Clinical Anatomy and Physiology of the Visual System*, ed. Lee Ann Remington (Saint Louis: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2012), 233-52.

⁷⁸ Belle Beth Cooper, "How Twitter's Expanded Images Increase Clicks, Retweets and Favorites [New Data]," *Buffer Social*, 2016, accessed Mar 18, 2018, <https://blog.bufferapp.com/the-power-of-twitters-new-expanded-images-and-how-to-make-the-most-of-it>.

⁷⁹ Kevan Lee, "9 Informative Infographics to Guide Your Visual Content Marketing," *Buffer Social*, 2014, accessed Mar 18, 2018, <https://blog.bufferapp.com/infographics-visual-content-marketing>.

⁸⁰ David F. Marks, "New Directions for Mental Imagery Research," *Journal of Mental Imagery* 19, no. 3-4 (1995); Emily A. Holmes and Andrew Mathews, "Mental Imagery and Emotion: A Special Relationship?," *Emotion* 5, no. 4 (2005); Santa Iachini, Fiorella Giusberti, and Piercarla Cicogna, "Imagery and Emotions," *Imagination, Cognition and Personality* 15, no. 1 (1995).

capacity of images to make contact with memories for emotional episodes in the past.⁸¹

With the help of Sina Weibo, online spoof, (egao, 恶搞) has become an important method employed by China's netizens to express discontent. According to China Daily (an official English-language newspaper), egao refers to "a subculture that is characterized by humor, revelry, subversion, grass-roots spontaneity, defiance of authority, mass participation and multi-media high-tech."⁸² The targets of online spoofs are often political propaganda and government officials. Spoofs on official language and political discourse mock political propaganda and make it meaningless and ridiculous. The well-known homonymic replacement of "harmony society" (hexie shehui, 和谐社会) by "river crab society" (hexie shehui, 河蟹社会) is a good example. Online activists always make various satirical pictures and videos to express and spread dissenting views.

In short, Most Sina Weibo users are not only the audience but also information suppliers. UGC has diversified information content and forms that people can access every day. Via their networks of follower relations, users can disseminate information on a large scale in a short time. More importantly, many-to-many communication has promoted Sina Weibo users' interaction.

3.3 Social Networks on Sina Weibo

Social Networks on Sina Weibo have a crucial role in promoting online political protests. Sina Weibo enables users to build follower relations with no difficulty. Myriad follower relations constitute their online social networks. Implications of online social networks for online political protests are far-reaching. To begin with, in terms of the dissemination

⁸¹ Emily A. Holmes and Andrew Mathews, "Mental Imagery in Emotion and Emotional Disorders," *Clinical Psychology Review* 30, no. 3 (2010).

⁸² Qing Huang, "Parody Can Help People Ease Work Pressure," *China Daily* 2006.

of information, online social networks have particular significance for China's online political protests. Social networks on Sina Weibo make it possible for online protesters to cheaply and rapidly share information with a vast audience. China's media environment is highly restrictive. The ruling party, the CCP, keeps an iron grip on the media. Almost all traditional media, such as television, radio, newspaper, and so forth, have close ties to or are under the enormous influence of the government, even though they are not wholly controlled.⁸³ Under such circumstances, traditional media can hardly play a role as a powerful medium for spreading dissidents' voices. As a result, it is difficult for protesters to use public media to spread their opinions and suffering to potential sympathizers. Social networks on Sina Weibo create a new channel for protesters to diffuse information. It is not necessary for online protesters to make use of traditional media to spread their information. Instead, they can send news that may not be accepted by traditional media to other internet users via online social networks. For example, immediately after one online activist makes posts on Sina Weibo to showcase his/her findings about government officials' wrongdoing or injustices they suffered, his/her followers will receive the information and some may repost the information. As long as more and more Sina Weibo users repost the post, it can circulate through online social networks to all users in a short time.

Secondly, online social networks can facilitate the construction of collective identity. As discussed in Chapter 2, collective identity refers to the feeling of belonging to a group. The construction of collective identities is a process through which participants interact with each other to mark the boundaries of the group, imparts significance to the collectivity, and outline their vision of how collective action should develop.⁸⁴ In other

⁸³ Jonathan Hassid, "Controlling the Chinese Media: An Uncertain Business," *Asian Survey* 48, no. 3 (2008).

⁸⁴ A. Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 71-72.

words, collective identity is an interactional accomplishment. Reciprocal and repeated interaction is essential to the formation of collective identity.

Sina Weibo acts as a communication platform for online activists' repeated interactions. Online activists who hold something in common can bond together and communicate with each other directly via building follower relations on Sina Weibo. Many-to-many communication has provided conditions for public discussions about various social issues. In the meantime, their conversations are recorded in texts and are accessible to all participants, which makes it more convenient for online activists to distinguish who is one of us. Put differently, group boundary demarcation is easier in many-to-many communication. Furthermore, many-to-many communication enables activists to express opinions and share information, which helps them to make sense of what is happening in society and to develop collective consciousness on particular issues and problems. Finally, continuous interaction among online activists is a kind of emotional investment, which is an important aspect of collective identity formation.⁸⁵

Thirdly, social networks on Sina Weibo enable numerous online activists to cooperate closely with each other in the absence of leaders. In other words, Sina Weibo reduces the complexity of cooperation among online activists so that coordinating leaders are not necessary for online political protests. In the traditional sense, leaders are crucial in recruiting and organizing other people to participate in a protest. Stepan-Norris and Lind argue that movement leaders are decision-makers to coordinate group members and set group goals.⁸⁶ Oberschall claims that the role of leaders is to mobilize resources and establish organizations to provide incentives and deal with risks.⁸⁷ Morris and Staggenborg claim that protest leaders are "strategic decision-makers who inspire and

⁸⁵ Ibid., 72.

⁸⁶ Judith Stepan - Norris and Ben Lind, "Social Movements, Leadership In," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

⁸⁷ A. Oberschall, *Social Conflict and Social Movements* (Pearson Education, Limited, 1973), 204-09.

organize others to participate in social movements.”⁸⁸ Van Belle argues that leadership has a vital part in “overcoming both the initial barriers to collective action and the ongoing difficulties encountered in the pursuit of public goods.”⁸⁹ However, the situation has changed. Networked activists on Sina Weibo can interact with each other closely, which reduces the need for movement leaders. In other words, coordinating leaders are not necessarily required to launch online political protests. What is needed for the protests is a certain number of starters. They usually come from grassroots and attempt to mobilize support online.

“Human Flesh Search” (HFS) to identify and expose government officials who are involved in illegal or unethical activities is a useful example to show how a great number of online protesters make coordinative efforts without leaders. HFS is an imprecise translation of the Chinese term, “renrou sousuo (人肉搜索).” It refers to a crowd-sourced detective work and aims at identifying and exposing individuals to make them get fired, suffer public humiliation, or even be subject to legal penalties.⁹⁰ The success of HFS rests on online activists’ joint efforts rather than charismatic leaders. In the beginning, online activists gather information about a dishonest government official online or offline. They then exchange and expose the information they obtained on Sina Weibo. Usually, through the joint efforts of online activists, details about the official such as name, occupation, rank, home address, mobile phone number, and incriminating evidence, may be disclosed to the public. More often than not, these details can give the dishonest official a shock and draw the attention of discipline watchdog. Generally speaking, the use of

⁸⁸ Aldon D. Morris and Suzanne Staggenborg, “The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. David. A. Snow, Sarah. A. Soule, and Hanspeter. Kriesi (Wiley, 2004), 171.

⁸⁹ Douglas A. Van Belle, “Leadership and Collective Action: The Case of Revolution,” *International Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (1996).

⁹⁰ Tom Downey, “China’s Cyberposse,” *The New York Times Magazine* 2010. For more information on HFS, see: Kevin Heisler, “Human Flesh Search Engines in China,” *Search Engine Watch*, 2008. Alice Xin Liu, “Human Flesh Search Engines? Niu!,” *The Guardian*, 2008. Fei Yue Wang et al., “A Study of the Human Flesh Search Engine: Crowd-Powered Expansion of Online Knowledge,” *Computer* 43, no. 8 (2010). Li Gao, “The Emergence of the Human Flesh Search Engine and Political Protest in China: Exploring the Internet and Online Collective Action,” *Media, Culture & Society* (2015).

Weibo has significantly reduced the need for leaders and made online political protests leaderless.

To conclude, social networks on Sina Weibo allow possibilities for online protesters to spread information quickly, and the cost incurred in transmitting a piece of information to a large audience is reduced to an almost negligible level. More importantly, by online social networks, networked protesters can intensify the degree of interaction among them, which facilitates the formation of a sense of collective identity.

3.4 Influential Allies on Sina Weibo

Sina Weibo has hundreds of millions of users, but the social power of influencing public discussions on Sina Weibo, to no small extent, is concentrated in the hands of a small number of high-profile Sina Weibo users.⁹¹ Some of these influential individuals and organizations are possible to become allies of online protesters. They often express sympathy for online protesters by spreading protesters' information and making comments, which may draw public attention to online protests.

First, many of Sina Weibo's "Big Vs" may become influential allies of online protesters. Big Vs refer to individual Sina Weibo users with a great number of followers. They mainly consist of famous scholars, media professionals, successful businesspeople, entertainment stars, and so forth. In other words, they are not China's ruling elites but cultural elites, intellectual elites, and business elites. Many Big Vs sympathize with the

⁹¹ Sina Weibo has two different types of users. First, individuals open personal accounts to represent themselves. Second, many organizations and groups, like media, company, government authorities have resisted for official accounts. For more information, see Vanessa Wan, "The Ultimate Guide to Sina Weibo: The Largest Micro-Blogging Platform in China," *Dragon Social*, 2018, accessed 06 June, 2019, <https://www.dragonsocial.net/blog/chinese-social-media-weibo-and-twitter-comparison/#Diff>; Social SEO, "How to Set up a Weibo Business Account and Why It Matters," *Medium*, 2018, accessed 07 June, 2019, https://medium.com/@hello_73030/how-to-set-up-a-weibo-business-account-and-why-it-matters-3f211d629684.

grassroots and are concerned about social suffering. More often than not, they tend to come out in favor of online protesters. A Big V is situated at the center of his/her online social networks. His/her extensive social connections act as pathways through which relevant information is disseminated to followers. In other words, a Big V can be described as an information source connected to a large number of other Sina Weibo users via follower relations. Big Vs can determine which information will be disseminated to their followers. Consequently, they can affect the opinions, decisions, and actions of their followers. As the saying goes on the Internet:

If you have more than ten thousand fans, your influence is equal to a magazine. If you have more than one hundred thousand fans, your influence is equivalent to a local newspaper. If you have more than one million fans, your influence is equal to a national newspaper. If you have more than ten million fans, your influence is similar to a television station.⁹²

Second, NGOs and commercial media outlets are two groups of organizations that tend to become online protesters' allies on Sina Weibo. Since Sina Weibo is the most influential micro-blogging platform in China, most of China's NGOs and commercial media have opened their official accounts on Sina Weibo, and some of them have become most-followed accounts. China's NGOs and commercial media became increasingly active after China's reform and opening up. Since the 1980s, the Chinese government has not sought to monopolize all the social resources, but rather "focuses its attention on organizations where key government functions were performed, where major decisions about resource allocation were made, and where China's future elite would be trained."⁹³ In other words, the Chinese government has loosened control of society and granted it more autonomy.

⁹² Ming Jing and Danchen Ma, "论微博大 v 如何传播正能量 [Research on How Weibo Big Vs Spread Positive Energy]," *Journalism Lover* 2 (2014).

⁹³ Andrew G Walder, *China under Mao* (Harvard University Press, 2015), 8.

The Chinese government started to allow NGOs to perform some functions of social welfare after the reform and opening up. Beforehand, the CCP had dissolved almost all NGOs.⁹⁴ The number of NGOs has increased significantly over the past two decades.⁹⁵ By the end of 2015, the number of legitimately registered NGOs in China had grown to 662,000.⁹⁶ Many NGOs are government-established or government-led NGOs. They are fully funded by the government, and their leadership positions are often filled by government officials.⁹⁷ Thus, they are not authentic NGOs but disguised forms of government authorities. Nevertheless, there are also some citizen-led NGOs, and they have made a contribution to domestic governance, such as environmental protection, fighting against child abduction, and the protection of vulnerable groups. Many scholars claim that an emerging civil society has become visible in China.⁹⁸ In general, although China's government still puts NGOs under tight control, it cannot be denied that NGOs have a role in China's social governance. China's NGOs often use their Sina Weibo official accounts to engage in online discourse to boost their social influence.

When it comes to China's commercial media, its boom is the result of the marketization of the Chinese media. Prior to the reform and opening up, all Chinese news media were run by the state.⁹⁹ The state took overall charge of every aspect of media business

⁹⁴ Keping Yu, "The People Republic of China's Sixty Years of Political Development," in *China's Political Development: Chinese and American Perspectives*, ed. Kenneth Lieberthal, Cheng Li, and Keping Yu (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2014), 54-57.

⁹⁵ Jennifer Y. J. Hsu and Reza Hasmath, "A Maturing Civil Society in China? The Role of Knowledge and Professionalization in the Development of Ngos," *China Information* 31, no. 1 (2017).

⁹⁶ Wenjuan Zhang, "The Internationalisation of Chinese Ngos and Their Engagement with the United Nations," *China Report* 53, no. 3 (2017).

⁹⁷ Yiyi Lu, *The Growth of Civil Society in China Key Challenges for Ngos*, Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House, 2005).

⁹⁸ Ming Wang, "The Rise of Civil Society in China," in *China's Political Development: Chinese and American Perspectives*, ed. Kenneth Lieberthal, Cheng Li, and Keping Yu (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2014); Wang and Minzner, "The Rise of the Chinese Security State."; Ye Zhang, *China's Emerging Civil Society*, Brookings Institution Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies (2003).

⁹⁹ Hassid, "Controlling the Chinese Media: An Uncertain Business."

operations and finances.¹⁰⁰ The Chinese media were simply a government propaganda machine to spread the socialist ideology and the CCP leadership's ideas. After the 1980s, Chinese authorities reduced control over China's media outlets by commercializing them.¹⁰¹ The government gave the commercial media license to serve the public but no longer provided state subsidies for them. Under market mechanisms, the commercial media outlets have gained some degree of independence, but they have to finance themselves with advertising and subscriptions, which compels them to compete with one another to attract a wider audience. After Sina Weibo was launched in 2009, China's commercial media outlets gradually opened their official accounts to extend their influence. Driven by commercial interests, some Chinese commercial media may report on potentially sensitive topics, such as officials' corruption and misconduct, to enhance prestige and gain greater audience reach.

Influential allies on Sina Weibo have the potential to help online protesters to arouse public resonance. As argued by Yang, "numerous issues are brought into Chinese cyberspace and discussed daily. Yet only some of them provoke public contention. Most are flooded by the oceans of online posts and never get a chance to be read. One reason is that they lack resonance."¹⁰² By virtue of their immense influence, influential allies are able to help online protesters' voices hit the headlines on Sina Weibo, with the result that online political protests may resonate with more netizens. Moreover, Sina Weibo users often regard Big Vs as being credible. An endorsement of the online political protest by The Big Vs may strongly influence their followers' decisions on whether to participate in the protest.

¹⁰⁰ Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 50-51.

¹⁰¹ Jinchang Wang, "A Study on the Quest for Freedom of Press by Chinese Media Professionals in China since 1978" (Doctoral thesis University of Technology Sydney, 2013), 71-72.

¹⁰² Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China : Citizen Activism Online*, 57.

In summary, there are hundreds of millions of Sina Weibo users. Those who can attract a huge number of followers have more influence on Sina Weibo. High-profile Sina Weibo users with millions of followers have immense power to shape public opinion. Some of high-profile Sina Weibo users, including Big Vs, commercial media outlets, and NGOs, may speak out in favor of other users when they attempt to hold online political protests. By wielding their influential, they may help online protests capture public attention and inspire others to participate in the collective action.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed three elements of the POS for China's online political protest—elite divisions, online social networks, and influential allies. First, elite divisions between the central and local governments and those within the central government have an important part in facilitating China's online political protests. Conflicts of interests between the central and local governments have brought about the central-local elite divisions. These elite divisions imply that online activists may receive positive responses from the central government when protesting over the local government's wrongdoings or corrupt local officials. This is because the central government can exploit online political protests to understand what causes public dissatisfaction and can win popular support by criticizing local governments and punishing corrupt local government officials. Moreover, elite divisions also exist within the Chinese central government. Within the central government, state authority is delegated horizontally to different central government departments. Diverging interests among state ministries and commissions have given rise to splits among political elites representing different departments. When online activists are trying to stage protests against one central government agency's policy or its officials' misconduct, they may receive support from other central government departments. In brief, the central-local divisions and those within the central government can provide individuals or groups with opportunities to hold online political protests.

Second, social networks on Sina Weibo have profound implications for China's online political protests. Sina Weibo is one of the most influential social media websites in China and has become a platform for Chinese internet users to obtain information and to stay connected with friends, family, colleagues, and people with similar interests to their own. Social networks on Sina Weibo enable online activists to retrieve and disseminate information at little cost in terms of money, time, and effort. In addition, these online social networks are helpful in shaping collective identities and lowering the difficulty of cooperation among online activists, to such an extent that coordinating leaders are not essential for online political protests.

Finally, influential allies on Sina Weibo can provide support for online political protests. Big Vs, who are individual Sina Weibo users with a massive number of followers, are likely to become influential allies of online protesters. They consist primarily of China's social elites. Some of them may express sympathy for online protesters and help them to attract public attention. Moreover, most of China's commercial media outlets and NGOs have official accounts on Sina Weibo. They may come out in favor of online protesters.

Chapter 4: Internet Control in China

Chapter 3 has examined the first three elements of the POS in China, including elite divisions, online social networks, and influential allies. This chapter examines the fourth element of the POS, namely internet control. It aims at exploring the implications of China's internet control for online political protests. The popularity of the Internet in China has soared over the past decade. Yet as the number of Chinese internet users continues to increase, concern within the CCP leadership mounts that the Internet may become a vehicle for political dissidents to challenge the authority of the CCP. To deal with potential threats presented by the internet development to its authoritarian rule, the Chinese government has established a sophisticated and strict internet regulation system to control cyberspace and are still struggling to enhance its censorship capacity by continually adopting new technologies. However, the regulatory regime is not necessarily the whole story of China's internet control. Another part of the story involves the implementation of internet control in practice. In China, many state agencies engage in internet regulation. Diverging interests among them make China's internet regulation an area where bureaucratic turf wars regularly occur. Moreover, China's social media websites have their own commercial interests. To increase web traffic and get ahead of their competitors, they do not always conduct strict self-censorship. This chapter argues that the contradictions among China's internet regulators as well as the commercial interests of China's social media websites render China's internet control capricious, which contributes to the emergence and development of online political protests.

This chapter is organized into five sections. The first three sections examine China's internet control prior to 2013. Section 4.1 analyzes the Chinese government's means of internet control in depth. Section 4.2 focuses on the main central government departments responsible for regulating China's cyberspace. Section 4.3 analyzes the split among

China's internet regulators and its implications for the implementation of China's internet control. Section 4.4 discusses the Xi Jinping administration's efforts to restructure China's internet regulation since 2013. After rising to power, Xi Jinping attempted to solve problems caused by the fragmented authority in China's internet regulation. The section explains why Xi's institutional reform has not produced a fundamental change to the fragmented situation in the country's internet regulation. Section 4.4 also analyzes the effects made by Xi's institutional restructuring on the coordination of authority in China's internet control. Finally, Section 4.5 provides a conclusion.

4.1 Approaches to Controlling China's Internet

This section details various measures employed by Chinese authorities to control the Internet. According to "White Paper: The Internet in China" issued by the State Council Information Office (国务院新闻办公室, SCIO), the objectives of regulating the Internet are:

To promote general and hassle-free internet accessibility, and sustainable and healthy development, guarantee citizens' freedom of speech online, regulate the order of internet information transmission, promote the positive and effective application of the Internet, create a market environment for fair competition, guarantee the citizens' rights and interests as vested in the Constitution and other laws, and guarantee safety for internet information and state security.¹

Although it argued for civil liberties, the Chinese government has developed a series of methods and tactics to restrict citizens' freedom of speech online and the dissemination of online information. China's means of internet control, on the whole, contains four

¹ The Information Office of the State Council, "White Paper: The Internet in China," (Beijing 2010).

aspects: restricting internet access, censoring internet content, self-censorship, and manipulating public opinion.

4.1.1 Control of Internet Access

The Chinese government controls both internet-related infrastructure construction and internet access. The “Provisional Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on the Management of International Networking of Computer Information Networks” (中华人民共和国计算机信息网络国际联网管理暂行规定), which was issued by the State Council in 1996 (revised in 1997), is regarded as the first attempt to regulate the Internet.² This regulation aimed at developing international information exchange and establishing physical restrictions on the connections between domestic networks and international networks. For example, according to the regulation’s Article 6:

Computer information networks shall use the international channels of import and export outlets provided by the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications in the country’s public telecommunications network when they carry out direct international networking. No organization or individuals shall be allowed to establish or use other channels for international networking without authorization.³

In March 1998, the State Council promulgated the “Implementation Rules for Provisional Regulations of the Administration of International Networking of Computer Information in the People’s Republic of China” (中华人民共和国计算机信息网络国际联网管理暂行规定实施办法), which emphasized once more that “computers or computer

² Philip Sohmen, "Taming the Dragon: China’s Efforts to Regulate the Internet," *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs* 1, no. 1 (2001).

³ The State Council of China, "中华人民共和国计算机信息网络国际联网管理暂行规定 [Provisional Regulations of the Peoples Republic of China on the Management of International Networking of Computer Information Networks]," (Beijing 1996).

information networks of individuals, legal persons, and other institutional subscribers must be connected with international networks through access networks. International networking conducted in other ways is prohibited.”⁴ Moreover, Article 11 provides that “access units engaged in profit-making operations concerning international networking shall be subject to the administration of the system of international networking business licenses.”⁵ The use of the administrative licensing method to regulate the Internet is helpful in planning the development of the information industry but gives the government the monopoly power to control China’s connection to international networks.

On 25 September 2000, the “Telecommunications Regulations of the People’s Republic of China” (中华人民共和国电信条例) was issued at the thirty-first regular meeting of the State Council, in which the Internet was included in the telecommunications business and thereby subjected to telecommunications regulations. According to the regulation’s Articles 8 and 9:

The telecommunications business is divided into two categories: basic telecommunications business and value-added telecommunications business. Basic telecommunications business refers to the provision of basic facilities of public networks, public data transmission, and basic speech communication. Value-added telecommunications business refers to the provision of telecommunication and information services by using the basic facilities of public networks.⁶

⁴ The State Council Informatization Leading Group, “中华人民共和国计算机信息网络国际联网管理暂行规定实施办法 [Implementation Rules for Provisional Regulations of the Administration of International Networking of Computer Information in the Peoples Republic of China],” (Beijing 1998).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The State Council, “中华人民共和国电信条例 [Telecommunications Regulations of the People’s Republic of China],” (Beijing 2000).

Moreover, its Article 9 states that “a basic telecommunications business provider shall be a company established in accordance with the law and specialized in the basic telecommunications business, and the state-owned shares in the company are not lower than 51 percent.”⁷ As for China’s internet access, this means that only state-owned telecom companies can become internet access providers (IAPs) to establish and operate backbone networks (骨干网) with the foreign internet connection and to license ISPs at the next tier.

In general, there is a four-tiered internet access structure in China: the telecommunications administrative authorities, IAPs, ISPs, and internet users. All networks with international connections have to be approved by the Chinese government. By manipulating IAPs, Chinese authorities can control the inflow of data from abroad and the outflow of data from China. All ISPs are subject to the supervision of related telecommunications administrative bodies. Consequently, as argued by Dowell, the Internet in China is set up as an Intranet in a rigidly hierarchical structure rather than the decentralized data network familiar to Westerners.⁸

4.1.2 Control of Internet Content

In addition to the control of internet access, the Chinese government also has devoted substantial resources to controlling online content. It has set a broad standard for judging harmful and improper information and has banned most business websites from producing original reporting from their news operations. The “Administrative Measures for Internet Information Services” (互联网信息服务管理办法, short for Administrative Measures) was adopted at the thirty-first regular meeting of the State Council on September 25, 2000. This regulation served as China’s “fundamental law” to regulate

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ William Thatcher Dowell, "Internet, Censorship and China," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 7 (2006).

internet information services.⁹ First, according to Article 15 of Administrative Measures, providers of internet information services shall not produce, reproduce, distribute or disseminate information that includes the following content:

(1) content that is against the basic principles determined by the Constitution; (2) content that impairs national security, divulges State secrets, subverts State sovereignty or jeopardizes national unity; (3) content that damages the reputation and interests of the State; (4) content that incites ethnic hostility and ethnic discrimination or jeopardizes unity among ethnic groups; (5) content that damages State religious policies or that advocates sects or feudal superstitions; (6) content that disseminates rumors, disturbs the social order or damages social stability; (7) content that disseminates obscenity, pornography, gambling, violence, homicide and terror, or incites crime; (8) content that insults or slanders others or that infringes their legal rights and interests; and (9) other content prohibited by laws or administrative regulations.¹⁰

On 25 September 2005, Chinese authorities added two types of content into the blacklist: “(10) content that conducts activities in the name of an illegal civil organization; and (11) any other content prohibited by law or rules.”¹¹ It is worth noting that the list of prohibited topics is vaguely defined, which leaves room for arbitrary interpretation by China’s internet regulation agencies. For example, content disrupting the social order or damaging social stability and content damaging the reputation and interests of the state can be applied to a broad range of information.

⁹ Guosong Shao, *Internet Law in China* (Elsevier Science, 2012), 2.

¹⁰ The State Council, "互联网信息服务管理办法 [Administrative Measures for Internet Information Services]," (Beijing 2000).

¹¹ The State Council Information Office and The Ministry of Information Industry, "互联网新闻信息服务管理规定 [Provisions on the Administration of Internet News Information Services]," (Beijing 2005). <https://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/provisions-on-the-administration-of-internet-news-information-services>

Second, according to Administrative Measures, internet information services are classified into two categories: profitable internet information service and non-profitable internet information service; besides, the government implements an administrative licensing system for profitable internet information services and a filing system for non-profitable internet information services.¹² This means that any entity tending to host a commercial website in China is required to obtain ICP license and any entity tending to host a non-commercial website in China is required to file its activities for the record.

Thirdly, on 25 September 2005, the SCIO and the Ministry of Information Industry (MIIT, 工业和信息化部) jointly promulgated the “Provisions on the Administration of Internet News Information Services” (互联网新闻信息服务管理规定, short for Administrative Provisions). The regulation restricts websites’ freedom to produce original reporting. To begin with, Administrative Provisions refer to news information as “the reports and comments on political, economic, military, diplomatic and other social and public affairs, and the reports and comments on relevant social emergencies.”¹³ Also, according to the Administrative Provisions, internet news information services contain “publication of news information, provision of electronic bulletin board services for current and political affairs and distribution of communications of current and political affairs to the public, through the Internet.”¹⁴ In February 2017, Chinese authorities revised the regulation and broadened the definition of internet news information services, stating that “internet news information services include the services of collecting, editing, issuing and transloading internet news information and the services of transmission platforms.”¹⁵

¹² The State Council, "互联网信息服务管理办法 [Administrative Measures for Internet Information Services]."

¹³ The State Council Information Office and The Ministry of Information Industry, "互联网新闻信息服务管理规定 [Provisions on the Administration of Internet News Information Services]."

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ The Cyberspace Administration of China, "互联网新闻信息服务管理规定 2017 [Provisions on the Administration of Internet News Information Services2017]," (Beijing 2017).

Second, Administrative Provisions divided internet news information service providers into the following three types:

- 1) internet news information service providers established by news entities to publish news that was not published and broadcasted by the said entities, to provide electronic bulletin services of current affairs and politics, and to transmit communicative information of current affairs and politics to the public;
- 2) internet news information service providers established by non-news entities to reprint news information, to provide electronic bulletin services of current affairs and politics, and to transmit communicative information of current affairs and politics to the public;
- 3) the Internet news information service providers established by news entities to publish the news information which has been published or broadcasted by the said news entities.¹⁶

It stipulates that the establishment of the first and second types of internet news information service providers is subject to the approval of the SCIO; the establishment of the third type should be reported to the SCIO or information offices of provincial governments, autonomous regions, or municipality directly under the central government for archival filing.¹⁷ In practice, only does the first type of providers, which are attached to state-owned media, are approved to produce and report first-hand news online. Due to the fact that the majority of China's websites are not news entities, this means that they cannot produce original news reporting and can only reprint news information with approval from the SCIO. In February 2017, in order to further restrict Chinese websites

¹⁶ The State Council Information Office and The Ministry of Information Industry, "互联网新闻信息服务管理规定 [Provisions on the Administration of Internet News Information Services]."

¹⁷ Ibid.

from producing original reporting, the Chinese government required that “internet news information service providers shall separate collecting and editing of news from their business operations, and non-public capital shall not intervene in the collecting or editing of internet news information.”¹⁸

There are many other laws and regulations that are aimed at controlling internet content, such as “Regulations on the Administration of Business Premises of Internet Access Service” (互联网上网服务营业场所管理条例), “Measures for the Administration of Internet Domain Names of China” (互联网域名管理办法), and “Administrative Provisions on Internet Audio-Visual Programs” (互联网视听节目服务管理规定). In short, Chinese authorities have attempted to issue laws and regulations to keep a tight rein on online content that can be assessed by China’s internet users.

4.1.3 Self-censorship

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, self-censorship refers to “the act or action of refraining from expressing something (such as a thought, point of view, or belief) that others could deem objectionable.”¹⁹ In China, self-censorship is a common practice in traditional media,²⁰ and it also has been applied to control every aspect of internet usage.²¹ Yuxin Zhang, a scholar of the National Committee on US-China Relations, argues that “Chinese society has moved into an era of self-censorship where people

¹⁸ The Cyberspace Administration of China, “互联网新闻信息服务管理规定 2017 [Provisions on the Administration of Internet News Information Services 2017].”

¹⁹ Merriam Webster, “Definition of Self-Censorship,” accessed 15 March, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/self-censorship>.

²⁰ Jingrong Tong, “Press Self-Censorship in China: A Case Study in the Transformation of Discourse,” *Discourse & Society* 20, no. 5 (2009).

²¹ Pang, “Self-Censorship and the Rise of Cyber Collectives: An Anthropological Study of a Chinese Online Community.”; Fu King-wa, Chan Chung-hong, and Michael Chau, “Assessing Censorship on Microblogs in China: Discriminatory Keyword Analysis and the Real-Name Registration Policy,” *Internet Computing, IEEE* 17, no. 3 (2013).

themselves automatically ‘purify’ the internet environment.”²² In effect, self-censorship is used for not only individual internet users but also ISPs and ICPs.²³ In other words, both individuals and organizations are required to shoulder self-censorship duties under associated laws and regulations.

On the one hand, all Chinese ISPs and ICPs are subject to laws and regulations that make them accountable for information on their websites and platforms. According to Administrative Measures, once ISPs or ICPs discover prohibited activities and improper information, they are obligated to cease information dissemination, keep records of internet users’ personal information (e.g., account number, identity, telephone number, domain names, and information posted), and to report the information to the relevant authorities when requested.²⁴ Failure to practice self-censorship can result in a temporary or permanent suspension of the websites. According to Article 20 of Administrative Measures:

Those who violate this Regulation by producing, copying, publishing or distributing information as prohibited in Article 15 shall face criminal charges if the acts constitute crimes [...] Profitable internet information service providers shall be ordered by the authority issuing the Service License to suspended temporarily their services or their Service Licenses may be revoked. Non-profitable internet information service providers shall be ordered by the record-filing authority to close temporarily or permanently their websites.²⁵

²² Yuxin Zhang, "China: Self-Censorship Displaces Western Threats," *The Diplomat*, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/03/china-self-censorship-displaces-western-threats/>.

²³ ZhiJin Zhong, Tongchen Wang, and Minting Huang, "Does the Great Fire Wall Cause Self-Censorship? The Effects of Perceived Internet Regulation and the Justification of Regulation," *Internet Research* 27, no. 4 (2017); Pang, "Self-Censorship and the Rise of Cyber Collectives: An Anthropological Study of a Chinese Online Community."

²⁴ The State Council, "互联网信息服务管理办法 [Administrative Measures for Internet Information Services]."

²⁵ "互联网信息服务管理办法 2011 [Administrative Measures for Internet Information Services 2011]," (Beijing 2011).

For fear of losing their operating licenses, ISPs and ICPs operating in China tend to self-censor. For example, in order to satisfy Chinese government requirements, popular Chinese social media websites and applications like Weibo and WeChat, are well known for practicing self-censorship.²⁶ However, as the Chinese government has not provided a definite, intelligible guideline on harmful and improper information for ISPs and ICPs to follow, they often have to decide for themselves which topics should be filtered out. Many website administrators determinate whether to add an online breaking incident to their content filtering system according to news reports on the incident by state-run media outlets, such as People's Daily and Xinhua News Agency.²⁷ If the tone of the reports by the central media is positive, website administrators will not apply a strict censoring rule for the incident.

On the other hand, the Chinese government has introduced real-name registration (实名制) to create a climate of self-censorship among internet users. Real-name registration compels internet users to register with their real names and identification numbers as a precondition of getting access to a blog, website, or bulletin board system. On December 28, 2012, the Standing Committee of the Eleventh National People's Congress adopted the "Decision concerning Strengthening Network Information Protection" (关于加强网络信息保护的決定). This Decision stipulates that "ISPs that handle website access services for users, handle fixed telephone, mobile phone and other surfing formalities, or provide information publication services to users, shall, when concluding agreements with users or affirming the provision of service, require users to

²⁶ Tao Zhu et al., "The Velocity of Censorship: High-Fidelity Detection of Microblog Post Deletions," *USENIX Security Symposium* (2013); David Bamman, Brendan O'Connor, and Noah Smith, "Censorship and Deletion Practices in Chinese Social Media," *First Monday* 17, no. 3 (2012); King-wa, Chung-hong, and Chau, "Assessing Censorship on Microblogs in China: Discriminatory Keyword Analysis and the Real-Name Registration Policy."

²⁷ Pang, "Self-Censorship and the Rise of Cyber Collectives: An Anthropological Study of a Chinese Online Community."

provide real identity information.”²⁸ On 4 February 2015, China’s internet regulators issued the “Provisions on the Administration of Account Names of Internet Users” (互联网用户账号名称管理规定), which further required internet users to register with their real names when using internet services, including blogs, microblogs, instant messaging services, online discussion forums, news comment sections and related services.²⁹ The latest effort by the Chinese government to enforce real-name registration is the “Cybersecurity Law of the Peoples Republic of China” (中华人民共和国网络安全法) that comes into effect on 1 June 2017. According to its Article 24:

Network operators handling network access and domain registration services for users, handling stationary or mobile phone network access, or providing users with information publication or instant messaging services, shall require users to provide real identity information when signing agreements with users or confirming provision of services. Where users do not provide real identity information, network operators must not provide them with relevant services.³⁰

It is the first time that real-name registration has been made into law. It demonstrates that Chinese authorities have begun to implement the regulation of real-name registration fully, and Chinese internet users can no longer enjoy online anonymity. Although the government officially claims that this regulation aims at cracking down on spreading rumors and panic online, as well as protecting the lawful rights and interests of citizens, legal persons, and other organizations, it is an effective way to track those who are deemed as political dissidents by the government. In short, real-name registration is a coercive method to enhance the enforcement of self-censorship.

²⁸ National People’s Congress Standing Committee, “关于加强网络信息保护的決定 [Decision Concerning Strengthening Network Information Protection],” (Beijing 2012).

²⁹ The Cyberspace Administration of China, “互联网用户账号名称管理规定 [Provisions on the Administration of Account Names of Internet Users],” (Beijing 2015).

³⁰ National Peoples Congress, “中华人民共和国网络安全法 [Cybersecurity Law of the Peoples Republic of China],” (Beijing 2017).

4.1.4 State-supported Internet Commentators

The Chinese government employs internet commentators, also known as the 50-cent party or 50-cent army (五毛党), to control the Internet. The 50-cent party is an unofficial name for a group of state-supported Internet commentators in China, who are “hired by the Chinese government to post comments favorable towards government policies and to shape public opinion on internet message boards and forums.”³¹ Since 2005, some observers of the Chinese blogosphere have noted the existence of state-supported internet commentators, who leave comments and articles that promote CCP ideology, mobilize the people to follow government policies, and earn 50 cents for each posted comment.³² More surprisingly, one scholar finds that some members of the 50-cent Party are convicts, who are selected as internet commentators to post pro-government comments.³³ This means that “not only do some of these commenters likely not agree with the opinions they are posting, but they may also not even really do it voluntarily.”³⁴ There is little public source reporting on how many 50-cent party members are working in China at any particular time. According to researchers from Harvard University, there are an estimated 250,000 to 300,000 50-cent Party members at all levels of government-central, provincial, and local.³⁵ Moreover, they estimate that state-supported internet commentators fake nearly 448 million social media comments each year.³⁶

³¹ Weiwei Ai, "China's Paid Trolls: Meet the 50-Cent Party," *NewStatesman*, 2012, <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/politics/2012/10/china%E2%80%99s-paid-trolls-meet-50-cent-party>.

³² Sarah Cook, "Chinas Growing Army of Paid Internet Commentators," *Freedom House*, 2011, <https://freedomhouse.org/blog/china%E2%80%99s-growing-army-paid-internet-commentators>.

³³ Perry Link, "Censoring the News before It Happens," *NYR Daily*, 2013, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2013/07/10/censoring-news-before-happens-china/>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 02 (2013).

³⁶ "How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument," *ibid.* 111, no. 3 (2017).

The core purpose of the 50-cent party is to brainwash internet users and manipulate online public debate. State-supported internet commentators may spring into action immediately after an online political protest takes place. There are four main tactics used by the 50-cent army. First, the 50-cent army will release a great number of posts arguing in favor of the government's policies on China's social media to distract netizens from critical discussions of the government. For example, they may write posts to praise the CCP for China's good governance and the economic miracle. Second, the 50-cent party are likely to publish vicious personal attacks on and demonize some influential online activists to tarnish their reputation. As a result, in order to avoid becoming an attack target, internet users may consciously review the content they want to publish online. Thirdly, the 50-cent army may fabricate evidence to deceive the public. For instance, they can disguise themselves as eyewitnesses to contradict accounts of protesters reporting a case of government official's wrongdoing. Finally, the 50-cent party will engage in filtering out online comments. They will collect and report some internet users' comments to internet regulators for deletion. Generally speaking, Chinese authorities employ the 50-cent party to practice deception on the public and to intimidate online dissidents.

To summarize, the Chinese government has devised a set of complicated and stringent methods to control the Internet. The means of internet control manifests itself in four aspects. To begin with, the Chinese government has absolute control over internet access. By manipulating state-owned internet operators, the Chinese government can restrict internet access for Chinese internet users. Secondly, Chinese authorities keep a tight rein on online content delivered to Chinese internet users. They make every endeavor to restrict the dissemination of information that they deem to be illegal. Thirdly, China's internet users, ISPs and ICPs are subject to self-censorship. The Chinese government has taken measures, such as administrative licensing and real-name registration to create a climate of self-censorship in cyberspace. Last but not least, Chinese authorities have employed a huge number of internet commentators to manipulate public debate. The 50-cent party often disguise themselves as ordinary internet users to spread fake news to

distract the public and defame online activists. They also assist internet regulators with online content filtering.

4.2 Leading Government Agencies Responsible for Internet Control

In China, the central government has a firm hold on the authority of regulating the Internet. Local governments have limited powers over the administration of China's cyberspace. As mentioned in Chapter Three, most of China's biggest internet companies are situated in Beijing. As far as China's most popular social media platforms are concerned, except for WeChat, which is in Guangdong (广东省), other platforms, including Sina Weibo, Toutiao (头条), Douyin (抖音), Youku (优酷), and momo (陌陌), are located in Beijing. Although internet regulators of the Beijing municipal government have comparatively more influence on China's internet regulation than their counterparts in other local governments, they are almost under the direct control of the central government. In fact, the power of control over China's internet rests with several groups of central government departments. This section focuses on the analysis of the fragmented authority in China's internet control from the 1990s to 2013. In 2014, under the direction of Xi Jinping, the Chinese government introduced by far the most significant institutional reform of internet regulation. Section 4.4 examines the impact created by Xi's institutional reform on to the fragmented situation.

Many actors are engaged in the operation of China's internet regulation regime, which makes knowing which government agencies are in charge of controlling China's internet a complicated question. What makes the matter worse is that some internet regulatory agencies' names and responsibilities change time after time. To facilitate understanding, the author identifies three main groups of government apparatuses standing at the hub of controlling China's internet. The first group is in charge of regulating internet access. The second group is responsible for securing cyberspace and combating cybercrimes. The last

group oversees online ideological work to ensure that internet content actively serves the ideologies of communism.

4.2.1 Regulatory Agencies Responsible for Overseeing the Telecommunications Industry

The MIIT, with its predecessor, has been one of the primary internet regulators that oversee China's telecommunications industry. The earliest predecessor of the MIIT can be traced back to the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (邮电部, MPT), which was established in November 1949 as a functional organ of the State Council to regulate the Chinese telecommunications sector. Prior to 1994, the MPT had a monopoly on postal and public telecommunications services. One of its departments, the Directorate General of Telecommunications (电信总局, DGT), was responsible for the daily operations of public telecommunications. Below the MPT, there were many provincial and municipal Posts and Telecommunications Administrations (邮电管理局, PTAs). They played a similar role within each province and city.

On 19 July 1994, the Ministry of Electronics Industry (电子工业部, MEI), along with the Ministry of Railways (铁道部), the Ministry of Electric Power (电力工业部), and thirteen state-owned companies, set up China Unicom (中国联通) so as to break the MPT's monopoly in public telecommunications.³⁷ Meanwhile, in 1995, the Chinese central government tried to separate the MPT's enterprise management functions. As a result, DGT was changed from an operational arm of the MPT to an enterprise, China Telecom (中国电信), responsible for operating and managing the MPT's public

³⁷ Tan Zixiang, "Regulating China's Internet: Convergence toward a Coherent Regulatory Regime," *Telecommunications Policy* 23, no. 3 (1999).

telecommunications networks.³⁸ However, China Telecom was still under the direct control of the MPT in terms of finance, investment, personnel management.³⁹

The competition between China Telecom and China Unicom often led to bureaucratic infighting between the backers of the two telecommunications operators, especially between the MPT and the MEI. The increasing challenges from other ministries that had the same administrative rank as the MPT in China's bureaucratic hierarchy weakened the regulatory function of the MPT. It was difficult for the MPT to regulate China Unicom and coordinate its backing ministries. Once there were serious disputes, they had to turn to the State Council for resolution.⁴⁰ To deal with this problem, the CCP leadership set up the State Council Informatization Leading Group (国务院信息化领导小组, SCILG) in 1996, which was responsible for formulating and enacting policies and regulations concerning the information industry. The then-Vice Premier Zou Jiahua (邹家华) headed this leading group. Nevertheless, the SCILG failed to fulfill its functions owing to the lack of effective administrative, financial resources.⁴¹

On 1 April 1998, the State Council integrated the MPT, the MEI, and parts of the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television (国家广播电视总局) into the new Ministry of Information Industry (信息产业部, MII). The establishment of the MII, to a large extent, was ascribable to escalating clashes between the MPT and the MEI.⁴² The MII was the second predecessor of the MIIT, aiming to cope with the rapidly growing information and communication industry and balance the interests of all parties. Wu Jichuan (吴基传), the minister of the former MPT, became the first minister of the MII. Additionally, the office

³⁸ Ping Gao and Kalle Lyytinen, "Transformation of China's Telecommunications Sector: A Macro Perspective," *ibid.* 24, no. 8 (2000).

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Zheng, *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State, and Society in China*, 54-55.

⁴² Rogier Creemers, "The Pivot in Chinese Cybergovernance: Integrating Internet Control in Xi Jinping's China," *China Perspectives*, no. 4 (2015).

of SCILG was incorporated into the MII. After the reorganization, the MII became the single regulator in the information and telecommunications industry.

In 2008, the Chinese leadership started to restructure its government to deal with bureaucratic inefficiency by reducing ministry-level entities. The State Council integrated the MIT, the Commission for Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense (国防科学技术工业委员会), the SCIO, the State Tobacco Monopoly Administration (国家烟草专卖局), and most of the National Development and Reform Commission's (国家发展和改革委员会, NDRC) project-approval functions into the new MIIT. Since then, the MIIT, as the successor of the MII, has been in charge of China's telecommunications industry.

The MIIT and national telecom operators under its control, like China Telecom, China Mobile, and China Unicom, take responsibility for internet-related infrastructure construction and internet access service. The control hierarchy of internet access can be shown in Figure 4.1. The MIIT is at the top of the administrative hierarchy. National telecom operators are in the second tier. They are IAPs, which lease data communications networks for ISPs. Moreover, the MIIT is also involved in controlling online content. By manipulating IAPs, MIIT can control the inflow of information from abroad and the outflow of information inside China. Also, all websites operating in China have to apply to provincial and municipal telecommunications administrative authorities for ICP licenses and are subject to the annual inspection.

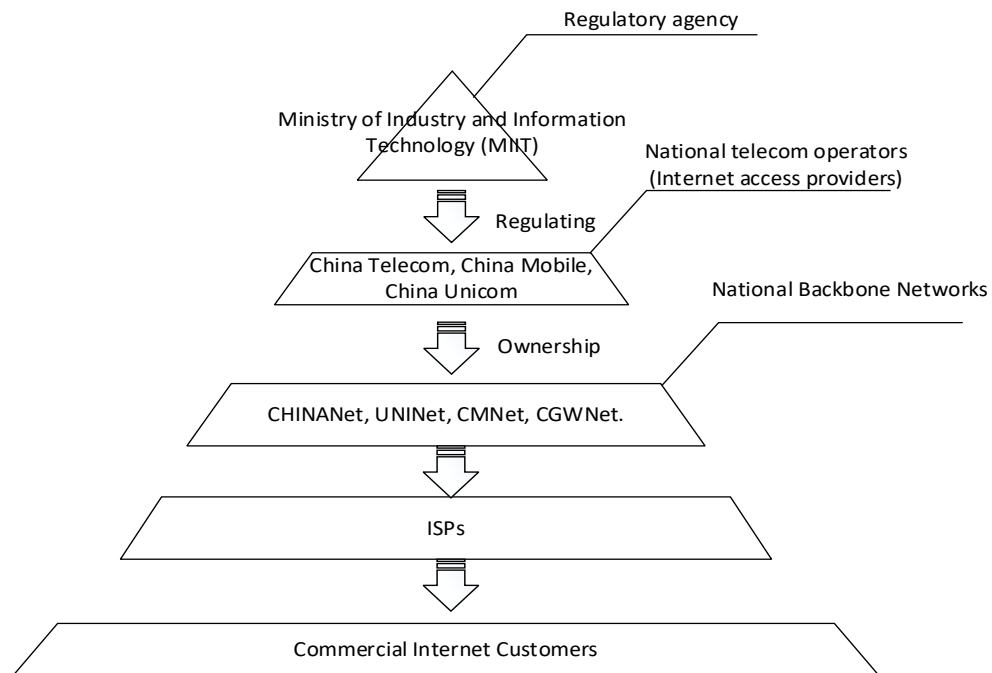


Figure 4.1 The Control Hierarchy of Internet Access

4.2.2 Regulatory Agencies Responsible for Securing Cyberspace and Cracking Cybercrimes

The Minister of Public Security (公安部, MPS) is responsible for securing cyberspace and cracking cybercrimes. The MPS is a ministry under the State Council and operates under the direct control of the Central Political and Legal Commission (中共中央政法委员会), a CCP organization responsible for political and legal affairs. The MPS, as China's chief law enforcement agency, has a massive influence over all aspects of internet policy in China.⁴³ The MPS took initial steps to control the Internet in 1997. On 30 December 1997, it issued a comprehensive regulation to control the Internet, "Measures for Security Protection Administration of the International Networking of Computer Information Networks" (计算机信息网络国际联网安全保护管理办法). The regulation

⁴³ Greg Austin, "How Chinas Ministry of Public Security Controls Cyber Policy," *The Diplomat*, 2015, accessed 05 January, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/04/how-chinas-ministry-of-public-security-controls-cyber-policy/>.

enabled the MPS to punish individuals who violated relevant Articles. Excerpts of the regulation's Articles 4-6 are as follows:

Individuals are prohibited from using the Internet to: harm national security; disclose state secrets; or injure the interests of the state or society. Users are prohibited from using the Internet to create, replicate, retrieve, or transmit information that incites resistance to the PRC Constitution, laws, or administrative regulations; promotes the overthrow of the government or socialist system; undermines national unification; distorts the truth, spreads rumors, or destroys social order; or provides sexually suggestive material or encourages gambling, violence, or murder. Users are prohibited from engaging in activities that harm the security of computer information networks and from using networks or changing network resources without prior approval.⁴⁴

Actually, it is difficult to accurately define terms like national security, state secrets, and national unification, which leaves ample space for the interpretation of the illegal use of the Internet.

Moreover, the MPS set up internet police (wangjing, 网警) forces to patrol cyberspace in 2000.⁴⁵ There is little official source reporting on how many internet police are employed to monitor China's Internet. It is reported that the number of China's internet police was about 50,000 in 2013.⁴⁶ The internet police not only performs functions to safeguard computer network and internet systems but also censors online information

⁴⁴ Ministry of Public Security, "计算机信息网络国际联网安全保护管理办法 [Measures for Security Protection Administration of the International Networking of Computer Information Networks]," (Beijing 1997).

⁴⁵ Thomas Lum, Internet Development and Information Control in the Peoples Republic of China, Library of Congress Washington Dc Congressional Research Service (2006), <https://apps.dtic.mil/docs/citations/ADA462477>.

⁴⁶ Kentaro Toyama, "How Internet Censorship Actually Works in China," *The Atlantic*, 2013, accessed 15 January, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/10/how-internet-censorship-actually-works-in-china/280188/>.

deemed to be illegal and harmful by the government. The police's traditional role of catching criminals and ensuring that people obey the law has extended to the Internet. Consequently, they have the power to force ICPs and individual internet users to remove content that is considered harmful to national security and social stability.⁴⁷

More importantly, the internet police have the power to arrest internet users who are alleged to commit offenses against the government. For example, on 1 September 2002, Wang Xiaoning was arrested and sentenced to 10 years in prison for often using email and Yahoo forums to distribute information inciting subversion.⁴⁸ In 2013, the internet police's power of arrest increased further. They can use the criminal charge of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" (寻衅滋事罪) to detain internet users. On 9 September 2013, China's top legal bodies, the Supreme People's Court and the Supreme People's Procuratorate, made a judicial interpretation to extend the charge to online behavior, claiming that it could be used to prosecute netizens whose comments and posts were deemed to be false information.⁴⁹ "Picking quarrels and provoking trouble" is a vague criminal charge. Many Chinese legal professionals regard it as "a pocket crime (口袋罪)—a criminal charge that can be applied to a broad range of offenses."⁵⁰ Since 2013, internet police have arrested many online activists on suspicion of picking quarrels and provoking trouble.⁵¹ In brief, the MPS is a powerful player in China's internet regulation.

⁴⁷ Lum, "Internet Development and Information Control in the Peoples Republic of China."; Toyama, "How Internet Censorship Actually Works in China".

⁴⁸ David Barboza, "Chinese Dissident, Jailed on Evidence Provided by Yahoo, Is Freed," *The New York Times*, 2012, accessed 5 May, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/01/world/asia/wang-xiaoning-chinese-dissident-in-yahoo-case-freed.html>.

⁴⁹ Edward Wong, "China Uses 'Picking Quarrels' Charge to Cast a Wider Net Online," *The New York Times*, 2015, accessed 14 June, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/27/world/asia/china-uses-picking-quarrels-charge-to-cast-a-wider-net-online.html>.

⁵⁰ Adam Wu, "Q. And A.: Chen Zhonglin on 'Picking Quarrels' Online," 2015, accessed 15 July, 2018, <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20150728/c28sino-chenzhonglin/en-us/>.

⁵¹ Jeremy Goldkorn, "Picking Quarrels and Provoking Trouble," *Australian Center on China in the World*, 2015, accessed 15 June, 2018, <https://www.thechinastory.org/yearbooks/yearbook-2014/forum-the-rights-and-wrongs-of-the-law/picking-quarrels-and-provoking-trouble/>.

Internet police monitor China's Internet 24 hours a day and can inflict penalties for ICPs and internet users in the name of safeguarding national security and social stability.

4.2.3 Regulatory Agencies Responsible for Online Ideological Work

The final group of regulatory agencies consists of multiple bureaucratic institutions within China's propaganda system, which are responsible for ideological and political control. The CCP extends the means of regulating traditional media outlets to the Internet by giving its propaganda system a mandate to exert political control over online information. CCP's propaganda system has an important place in Chinese governance. The system is a vast bureaucratic establishment, stretching into almost every medium with regard to information dissemination.⁵² Brady and Wang argue that the propaganda system refers to nearly all aspects of life in China.⁵³ The regulating objects of the propaganda system contain almost all publishing houses, radio stations, television stations, film production studios, museums, libraries, memorial halls, internet companies, and so on. In other words, nearly every possible medium that creates and circulates information for people in China falls under the regulating scope of the CCP propaganda system.

The CCP propaganda system has a long history and can date back to the Yan'an Rectification Movement (延安整风运动), following which it became a key mechanism for transforming the society of China after 1949.⁵⁴ The CCP adopted every imaginable means of propaganda after 1949, including "electronic media such as film and television, educational curriculum and research, print media such as newspapers and posters, cultural arts such as plays and music, oral media such as memorizing Mao quotes, as well as

⁵² David Shambaugh, "China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy," *The China Journal* (2007).

⁵³ Anne-Marie Brady and Wang Juntao, "China's Strengthened New Order and the Role of Propaganda," *Journal of Contemporary China* 18, no. 62 (2009).

⁵⁴ Shambaugh, "China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy."

thought reform and political study classes.”⁵⁵ In “Mao era,”⁵⁶ the propaganda system was widely used as a tool of class struggle. The means of “thought control” was often extremely violent, so that a great many families were broken, and a considerable number of people were driven to madness and death.⁵⁷ The Mao era’s political propaganda left horrific memories for most Chinese. Today, Mao’s model is no longer used by the CCP, but official propaganda in China still plays a pivotal role in political and cultural life, and the propaganda system remains powerful enough to manipulate information the public can access.

According to Brady, propaganda work by the CCP has been historically divided into two categories—directed towards Chinese people (internal) and directed towards foreigners and the outside world (external)—as well as four types: political, economic, cultural and social.⁵⁸ Shambaugh points out that the CCP’s Central Propaganda (or Publicity) Department (中共中央宣传部, CPD) is the leading organization to administer internal propaganda, while the CCP Central Office of Foreign Propaganda (中共中央对外宣传办公室), more commonly known as SCIO, oversees the country’s external propaganda and guides the foreign-propaganda activities of multiple government offices.⁵⁹

As an internal organization of the CCP in charge of ideology-related work and information dissemination, the CPD is directly under the control of the CCP Central Committee, which is the CCP’s highest organ of authority when the National Congress of

⁵⁵ Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

⁵⁶ The Mao era lasted from the founding of the Peoples Republic on October 1, 1949 to Deng Xiaopings grip onto power and policy reversal at the Third Plenum of the 11th Party Congress on December 22, 1978. See:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_People%27s_Republic_of_China_\(1949%E2%80%931976\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_People%27s_Republic_of_China_(1949%E2%80%931976))

⁵⁷ Barbara Mittler, "Popular Propaganda? Art and Culture in Revolutionary China," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* (2008).

⁵⁸ Anne-Marie Brady, "Guiding Hand: The Role of the Ccp Central Propaganda Department in the Current Era," *Westminster Papers in Communication & Culture* 3, no. 1 (2006).

⁵⁹ Shambaugh, "Chinas Propaganda System: Institutional Structures, Processes and Efficacy."

the Communist Party (全国代表大会) is not in session. The CPD has a long history in the CCP. It was formally founded in 1924 and was suspended during the Cultural Revolution (1967–77). Following the Cultural Revolution, it was restored in October 1977 and has continuously functioned until now. The CPD has three kinds of duties:

1) overseeing all ideological work, and all matters related to ideological work in China; 2) an overall policy-making role in various aspects of China's development, acting as a super organization helping to coordinate Party strategy on a given topic with a variety of government institutions; and 3) in charge of managing the nomenklatura system for propaganda, culture and education cadres as well as leading scholar and experts.⁶⁰

It is fair to say that The CPD has a leading part to play in guiding and mapping out China's overall ideological work. It issues China's media outlets, including print media and digital media, with editorial guidelines and administrative directives to ensure that the information accessed by people online and offline can more actively promote the interests of the CCP.⁶¹ Additionally, the CPD has provincial and local bodies. Lower-level institutions perform their duties to carry out various tasks assigned by the CPD in the form of written or verbal instructions.

In the external propaganda system, the SCIO/OFP is the most critical agency. The sign of the SCIO will be used when propaganda is broadcasted for the world, and particularly the foreign media in Beijing. External propaganda work refers to four principal aspects:

1) to tell China's story to the world, publicize Chinese government policies and perspectives, and promote Chinese culture abroad; 2) to counter what is perceived

⁶⁰ Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China*.

⁶¹ Beina Xu and Eleanor Albert, "Media Censorship in China," *The Council on Foreign Relations*, 2017, accessed 15 April, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/media-censorship-china>.

to be hostile foreign propaganda (such as the so-called “China threat theory”); 3) countering Taiwan independence proclivities and promoting unification; and 4) propagating China’s foreign policy.⁶²

Although the SCIO/OFP is mainly responsible for external propaganda work, it is also in charge of monitoring online content. The Internet Affairs Bureau of the SCIO used to have the mandate to deal with internet censorship in China. In May 2011, the SCIO transferred the bureau to a new subordinate agency, the Cyberspace Administration of China (国家互联网信息办公室, CAC, literally: State Internet Information Office).⁶³ The CAC reported directly to the State Council, and its primary duties include:

The agency directs, coordinates and supervises online content management. It handles administrative approval of businesses related to online news reporting. It directs the development of online gaming, online video, and online publication industries. The agency is engaged in promoting the construction of major news websites and managing government online publicity work. It is assigned the duties to investigate and punish websites violating laws and regulations. It oversees telecom service providers in their efforts to improve the management of registration of domain names, distribution of IP addresses, registration of websites and internet access.⁶⁴

The establishment of the CAC aimed to enhance China’s internet content management. However, the dramatic growth of China’s internet business has made the boundary between internal and external propaganda systems grow vaguer and vaguer. More often

⁶² Shambaugh, "Chinas Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy."

⁶³ Micheal Wines, "China Creates New Agency for Patrolling the Internet," *The New York Times*, 2011, accessed 15 May, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/05/world/asia/05china.html?mtrref=www.google.com&gwh=A15C2966A291387C0BE003C571405A26&gwt=pay>.

⁶⁴ Xinhua, "China Sets up State Internet Information Office," *China Daily*, 2011, accessed 14 December, 2017, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2011-05/04/content_12440782.htm.

than not, the CPD intervened in overseeing and controlling online content by issuing written or verbal instructions to social media websites. Overall, both internal and external propaganda systems can monitor and control China's online information. The CAC was under the control of the State Council, whereas the CPD reported to the CCP Central Committee directly. It seemed that, except for the CCP's top leader, no government institution could coordinate them.

In brief, the fragmented authority in China's internet control was noticeable. There were three groups of internet regulators from the 1990s to 2013. The first group consisted mainly of the MIIT and its predecessors. They were responsible for promoting China's economic growth by developing China's internet sector and overseeing internet access in China. The second group referred to China's public security apparatus, which took charge of securing cyberspace. Internet police maintained a 24-hour patrol on the Internet and had the power to detain internet users for questioning. The last group was composed of bureaucratic institutions from China's propaganda system. They oversaw online ideology-related work. Nevertheless, in practice, the roles of these regulators in controlling the Internet overlap to some extent.

4.3 The Implementation of Internet Control and Its Implications for Online Political Protests

As discussed above, China's internet is subject to the regulation by three groups of government agencies. However, some of them have overlapping functional responsibilities and conflicting bureaucratic interests, which has led to divisions among them.

The interests of government agencies are linked to their functional responsibilities. First, the MIIT is mainly responsible for developing China's information industry and

promoting the informatization process of the national economy. It has a low level of motivation to keep a tight rein on the Internet because strict internet censorship is likely to hinder the MIIT in the execution of the duty to develop China's internet economy. For example, on 14 August 2013, the State Council issued "The Several Opinions of the State Council on Promoting Information Consumption and Expanding Domestic Demand" (国务院印发关于促进信息消费扩大内需的若干意见), which stressed that:

To promote information consumption cannot only effectively drive domestic demand and foster new sources of economic growth, but also develop the service industry, accelerate economic transformation, and improve people's livelihood. It is a major measure that benefits both the current and the future.⁶⁵

Moreover, the State Council's guidance suggested that "China seeks to boost the public sector and household spending on information consumption by more than 20 percent annually through 2015;" also, it called for creating an active and healthy information consumption market, which would provide richer internet-related products and services.⁶⁶ Strict internet censorship causes a great deal of harm to the information consumption market and internet-related products and services deteriorate as a result. As the primary ministry in charge of promoting information consumption, the MIIT is highly likely to resist exerting strict control over information on the Internet. Therefore, the MIIT may have disagreements with other regulatory bodies that are responsible for imposing political control on China's Internet.

Second, the MPS is responsible for day-to-day law enforcement to maintain social and political stability. Economic development is not the first on its list of priorities. Thus, the

⁶⁵ The State Council, "国务院印发关于促进信息消费扩大内需的若干意见 [the Several Opinions of the State Council on Promoting Information Consumption and Expanding Domestic Demand]," (Beijing 2013).

⁶⁶ Ibid.

MPS tends to support strict internet censorship to ensure that online information that may trigger social instability can be removed before being spread far and wide. Internet police patrol the Internet all the time and pressure internet companies to assist with information surveillance. The police surveillance has already made negative impacts on the growth of China's internet companies. There are only a very few Chinese internet companies that succeed in getting into global markets, partly because their intimate relationship with internet police has made overseas consumers cautious.⁶⁷ If the level of information surveillance continues to increase, it will seriously impede the development of China's internet companies and even may destroy the CCP leadership's efforts to promoting economic growth through the development of information technologies.

Thirdly, the CAC is designed to guide, coordinate, and supervise the relevant government authorities that have jurisdiction over China's Internet. As discussed above, the CAC directs online content management, promotes the construction of major news websites, oversees online government propaganda. As such, the CAC needs to cooperate with the CPD to enhance political control on China's internet and work with the MIIT to facilitate internet development. Therefore, it is difficult for the CAC to balance all parties with a stake in the Internet. In short, competing bureaucratic interests have given rise to splits among them. As the implementation of internet control largely relies on the cooperation of these internet regulator, divisions among them will have a significant effect.

Divisions among China's internet regulators, along with the commercial interests of China's ICPs can render China's internet control incoherent and capricious. First, the commercial interests of China's ICPs can affect the practice of self-censorship. China's ICPs have to conduct self-censorship and can delete online content they deem illegal. As discussed in Section 4.1, prohibited topics listed by the government are too general and vague. As a result, supervisors of websites have some space for interpretation of illegal

⁶⁷ Meg Jing Zeng, "Thinking of Taking up Wechat? Here's What You Need to Know," *The Conversation*, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/thinking-of-taking-up-wechat-heres-what-you-need-to-know-88787>.

information. In other words, Websites have their own criteria for determining whether a topic will be deemed illegal by internet regulatory agencies. As most of popular social media websites in China belong to private companies, they need to attract more visitors to beat their business competitors. Web traffic is the core interest of them. Therefore, they prefer to capture every likely hot-spot news and allow their users to discuss it and share their in-depth opinions rather than always carry out strict self-censorship. As long as the breaking news is not about some highly sensitive topics, such as Tiananmen Square incident (天安门事件), Falun Gong (法轮功), and Tibet independence, social media websites may not screen out it immediately.

Second, divisions among China's internet regulators can produce significant effects on the implementation of internet control. Internet regulators acting in their own self-interest may give different interpretations on a piece of breaking news. As a result, it may take time for internet regulators to achieve a consensus on whether to define the breaking news as a politically sensitive topic or not. Before China's internet regulators reach agreement on a breaking incident, some of them may issue different verbal instructions to China's social media websites. In this situation, these websites have to make a trade-off between commercial profits and potential administrative punishment to decide whether to immediately block related content. If they believe that the profits can outweigh costs, they will not tighten censoring rules. Otherwise, they will filter out information about the breaking incident as soon as possible. As a result, continually changing situations often make supervisors of China's websites waver over whether to impose strict restrictions on a given breaking incident. In other words, they tend to constantly adjust their censoring rules according to the Chinese government's reactions.

Moreover, divisions among China's internet regulators restrict the role of state-supported internet commentators in manipulating public opinion. A notice issued by the People's Daily about running training sessions for internet commentators shows that party and government organs at all levels, public institutions, and state-run enterprises each have

their own internet commentators to scour the internet for bad news and to shape public opinion.⁶⁸ In other words, these internet commentators are attached to various organizations. As state-supported internet commentators act under direct orders from different regulatory bodies, fierce clashes may break out between these internet commentators. Under such circumstances, the role of online commentators in shaping public opinion will be crippled.

The capricious practice of China's internet control opens up possibilities for online political protests. Usually, online activists are uncertain about when internet control will step in an online political protest. Also, the extent of internet control is unpredictable in the course of an online political protest. Moreover, not all online activists will be arrested and face criminal charges. The Chinese government designs internet control as a coercive measure to push up the cost of organizing and participating in online political protests. Nevertheless, uncertainty in internet control reduces its deterrent effects on individual protest behavior. Therefore, before internet regulators are coordinated to make a unified action, online activists have opportunities to hold protests online. The uncertainty caused by capricious internet control will encourage online protesters to make repeated attempts.

4.4 Endless Bureaucratic Turf Wars in China's Cyberspace

This section focuses on explaining why Xi's institutional reform in 2014 has not removed the divisions among China's internet regulatory bodies. As such divisions still exist, internet control has remained incoherent and capricious since 2013.

4.4.1 The Institutional Reform in China's Internet Regulation

⁶⁸ The Peoples Daily Online, "网络评论员培训介绍 [the Introduction of Online Commentator Training]," 2016, accessed 15 May, 2019, <http://yuqing.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0929/c407482-28750768.html>.

Since assuming power, Xi Jinping introduced a new reform to reshape China's internet management agencies. The Xi administration attempted to create a new central agency to coordinate and supervise government agencies that already had jurisdiction over parts of the Chinese cyberspace. On 12 November 2013, The CCP adopted the "Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening the Reform" (中共中央关于全面深化改革若干重大问题的决定) at the third plenary session of the 18th CCP Central Committee. According to the decision, the CCP planned to "strengthen the management of the Internet in accordance with the law, accelerate the improvement of leadership system for internet management, and guarantee the country's Internet and information safety."⁶⁹ Two days later, Xi Jinping in his speech stressed that "one aim of the decision is to integrate the functions of the related departments and form joint forces in the management of the Internet covering both technology and contents and ranging from daily security to combating crimes, to ensure correct and safe internet usage."⁷⁰ Xi's speech set the tone for the institutional reform in China's internet regulation.

To implement the CCP leadership's decision, the Central Committee of the CCP announced the formal establishment of the Central Cyber Security and Informatization Leading Group (中央网络安全与信息化领导小组, CCSILG) on 27 February 2014. In the meantime, the Office of the Central Leading Group for Cyberspace Affairs (中共中央互联网安全和信息化领导小组办公室, OCLGCA) was set up as the leading group's secretariat to deal with its routine work. The OCLGCA was based in the CAC. In other words, the CAC is responsible for its day-to-day management.

⁶⁹ The CCP Central Committee, "中共中央关于全面深化改革若干重大问题的决定 [Decision of the Cccpc on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening the Reform]," (Beijing 2013).

⁷⁰ Jinping Xi, "关于《中共中央关于全面深化改革若干重大问题的决定》的说明 [Explanatory Notes for the "Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening the Reform"]," (Beijing Xinhuanet 2014).

In China, leading small groups often have a role as discussion and coordination organs to solve the problem of fragmented authority.⁷¹ Their members are usually at the ministry level, and their chairmen come from the Politburo Standing Committee. The CCSILG is no exception. The original personnel arrangements of the CCSILG were as follows: President Xi Jinping headed the leading group, and Premier Li Keqiang (李克强) and Liu Yunshan (刘云山), who were both members of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, were the leading group's deputy heads. Lu Wei (鲁伟) was appointed as the director of the CAC. There were another 18 members of the CCSILG. It is fair to say that its membership included not only economic and technological departments but also agencies concerned with ideology-related work and national security. Table 4.1 shows all the members of the small leading group.

Central Cyber Security and Informatization Leading Group

Leader	
Xi Jinping	Member of Politburo Standing Committee, Party General Secretary, State President
Deputy Leaders	
Li Keqiang	Member of Politburo Standing Committee, Premier of the State Council
Liu Yunshan	Member of Politburo Standing Committee, first-ranked secretary of the Secretariat
Members	
Ma Kai	Politburo member, Vice Premier
Wang Huning	Politburo member, head of Central Policy Research Office
Liu Qibao	Politburo member, head of the Central Propaganda Department
Fan Changlong	Politburo member, vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission

⁷¹ Grünberg Nis, "Revisiting Fragmented Authoritarianism in China's Central Energy Administration," in *Chinese Politics as Fragmented Authoritarianism : Earthquakes, Energy and Environment*, ed. Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard, China Policy Series (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

Meng Jianzhu	Politburo member, head of the Politics and Law Commission
Li Zhanshu	Politburo member, head of the CCP General Office
Guo Shengkun	Member of CCP Central Committee, Minister of Public Security
Yang Jing	Member of CCP Central Committee, Secretary of the Secretariat of the CCP Central Committee, State Councilor, and the Secretary General of the State Council
Fang Fenghui	Member of CCP Central Committee, the PLA Chief of General Staff and a member of the Central Military Commission
Xu Shaoshi	Member of CCP Central Committee, Chairman of the National Development and Reform Commission
Lou Jiwei	Member of CCP Central Committee, Minister of Finance
Wang Yi	Member of CCP Central Committee, Minister of Foreign Affairs
Yuan Guiren	Member of CCP Central Committee, Minister of Education
Wang Zhigang	Member of CCP Central Committee, Vice Minister of Science and Technology
Cai Wu	Member of CCP Central Committee, Minister of Culture
Cai Fuchao	Member of CCP Central Committee, Director of State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television
Miao Wei	Minister of Industry and Information Technology
Zhou Xiaochuan	Governor of the People's Bank of China
Lu Wei	Deputy head of the Propaganda Department, Director of the Office of the Central Leading Group for Cyberspace Affairs, Director of the State Internet Information Office

Table 4.1 Members of the CCSILG in 2014

It is worth noting that key players in controlling China's cyberspace were all on the list. Miao Wei (苗圩) was the Minister of the MIIT. Guo Shengkun (郭声琨) served as Minister of the MPS. Liu Yunshan (刘云山) was generally regarded as the top official in charge of ideology and propaganda work. He held many important positions, such as the

chairman of the Central Guidance Commission on Building Spiritual Civilization (中央精神文明建设指导委员会) and president of the Central Party School (中央党校). Lu Wei, who held several posts simultaneously, including the deputy head of the CPD, director of the OCLGCA, and director of the CAC, was called as China's "Web Doorkeeper" and "new Internet czar."⁷² Liu Qibao (刘奇葆) was the head of the CPD; besides, Cai Wu (蔡武), Yuan Guiren (袁贵仁), and Cai Fuchao (蔡赴朝) were also from the CCP propaganda system. It is clear from the personnel arrangements of the CCSILG that the CCP leadership attempted to deal with divisions among internet regulators and to place emphasis on online content control.

4.4.2 The Ineffective Restructuring of China's Internet Regulatory Agencies

Despite Xi Jinping's effort to deal with the fragmented situation in China's internet regulation, it did not mean that the CCSILG was capable of fulfilling Xi's wish. This is not the first attempt made by the CCP's leadership to tackle the issue concerning the fragmentation of authority in China's political system by creating a leading group. During the past thirty years, the Chinese government has established various leading groups to address problems of power struggles in different areas. However, many of them have failed to produce the desired results. The National Leading Small Group for Addressing Climate Change and Energy Conservation and Emission Reduction Work (国家应对气候变化及节能减排工作领导小组) is a good example.⁷³ Consequently, there is reason to doubt if the CCSILG can bring about results that Xi Jinping hoped to achieve.

⁷² Paul Mozur and Jane Perlez, "Gregarious and Direct: China's Web Doorkeeper," *The New York Times*, 2014, accessed 5 June, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/02/world/asia/gregarious-and-direct-chinas-web-doorkeeper.html?_r=0.

⁷³ For more information about the role of the National Leading Small Group for Addressing Climate Change and Energy Conservation and Emission Reduction Work in China's energy sector, see Grünberg Nis, "Revisiting Fragmented Authoritarianism in China's Central Energy Administration."

In effect, the establishment of the CCSILG has not fundamentally changed the political landscape of China's internet regulation. The bureaucratic structure of China's internet regulation remains unchanged. First of all, there is no apparent increase in CAC's clout. The CCSILG mandated the CAC to undertake its office's daily work responsibility. This implies that the CAC's parent transferred from the State Council to the CCP's Central Committee. In other words, the CAC has become an apparatus of the CCP, reporting directly to the CCP's top leaders. However, this upgrade did not notably increase the CAC's staff and resources.⁷⁴ Only two of the MIIT's internet-related bureaus were transferred to the CAC.⁷⁵ As a result, the CAC still needs to borrow resources from powerful authorities, including the CPD, the MPS, and the MIIT. For example, after the CAC deems that one website is violating laws, it needs to cooperate with the MIIT to shut down the website. This is because the information and communication administration (信息通信管理局) of the MIIT is in charge of providing internet access service to China's websites. If the information and communication administration drags its feet in implementing instructions with which it disagrees, it is hard for the CAC to close the website in time.

Secondly, the role of the MPS in regulating China's internet has not declined since 2014. As discussed above, the MPS established internet police forces to censor the Internet in 2000. However, China's internet police had been working under the scenes before 2015.⁷⁶ On 31 May 2015, the MPS announced that, from 1 June 2015, internet police from 50 locations from metropolises like Beijing and Shanghai to small cities like Handan and Zibo would join Sina Weibo and other social networking sites to publicize their work,

⁷⁴ Danny Pang, "China's Cyberspace Authorities Set to Gain Clout in Reorganization," *New America*, 2018, accessed 5 July, 2018.

⁷⁵ Bing Zhou, "原工信部信息化推进司等正式划归中央网信办 [the Miit's Internet-Related Bureaus Were Officially Transferred to the Cac]," *Doit.com*, 2015, accessed 18 July, 2017, <http://www.doit.com.cn/article/0709288955.html>.

⁷⁶ Mark Magnier, "China's Internet Police Step out of the Shadows," *The Wall Street Journal*, 2015, accessed 29 July, 2017, <https://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2015/06/01/chinas-internet-police-step-out-of-the-shadows/>.

root out online illegal and harmful information, crack down on cybercrime, such as internet fraud and hacking, release case reports, and deal with public tip-offs.⁷⁷ Before long, in July 2015, the MPS launched a six-month program, code-named “Cleaning the Internet 2015” (净网 2015) to fight against the online criminal activities in the country. According to Reuters, the MPS had investigated more than 7,400 cybercrime cases and arrested over 15,000 suspects a month and a half into the program.⁷⁸

In addition, on 8 August 2015, it was reported that the MPS planned to set up cybersecurity police units (网安警务室) at major websites and internet companies to help them control cybercrimes, such as fraud and the spreading of rumors.⁷⁹ The measure of planting physical police units in leading internet firms represented the further expansion of the MPS’s influence. According to one report of China’s *Guangming Ribao* (光明日报), 1116 cybersecurity police units had been established by February 2017.⁸⁰ Internet police patrol the Internet 24 hours a day, which inclines netizens to practice self-censorship to avoid punishment.

Thirdly, the CPD’s power has also by no means declined due to the upgrade of the CAC. Since rising to power, Xi Jinping has given a high priority to the publicity and ideological work.⁸¹ Under the circumstances, the role of the CPD in censoring media outlets has

⁷⁷ Ben Blanchard, "Chinas Internet Police Open a Window on Web Censorship," *REUTERS*, 2015, accessed 20 June, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-internet/chinas-internet-police-open-a-window-on-web-censorship-idUSKBN0OH17N20150601>; The Beijing News, "50 省市网警首次集体亮相 从“幕后”到“前台” [Internet Police from 50 Locations Publicly Join Social Networking Sites]," *Peoples Daily*, 2015, accessed 16 July, 2018, <http://media.people.com.cn/n/2015/0601/c40606-27083186.html>.

⁷⁸ Clarence Fernandez, "Chinese Police Arrest 15,000 for Internet Crimes," *Reuters*, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-internet-idUSKCN0QN1A520150818>.

⁷⁹ Reuters, "中国将在重点网站和互联网企业设立“网安警务室” [China Plans to Set up Cybersecurity Police Units at Major Websites and Internet Companies]," 2015, accessed 15 June, 2018, <https://cn.reuters.com/article/china-internet-security-idCNKCS0QA13F20150805>.

⁸⁰ Haokui Wang, "全国已建成“网安警务室”1116家 [1116 Cyber-Security Police Units Have Been Set up Nationwide]," *Guangming Online*, 2017, accessed 16 Oct, 2017, http://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2017-02/14/nw.D110000gmrb_20170214_2-04.htm.

⁸¹ Kerry Brown and Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova, "Ideology in the Era of Xi Jinping," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 23, no. 3 (2018).

further developed. For example, the CPD often issues guidelines and directives to prevent Chinese media outlets from reporting politically sensitive topics. Besides, on 21 March 2018, The Central Committee of the CCP released a document, named “Program for the Deepening Reform of Party and Government Organs” (深化党和国家机构改革方案), which granted more power to the CPD. According to the document, the management responsibilities of the General Administration of Press, Publications, Radio, Film and Television (国家新闻出版广电总局) in press, publication, and film sectors were transferred to the CPD.⁸² A series of actions taken by the CPD demonstrated its enhanced role in regulating China’s cyberspace.

Finally, when it comes to the MIIT, although two of its internet-related bureaus were taken over by the CAC, the MIIT is still in charge of China’s three top China’s three major telecom operators—China Mobile, China Unicom, China Telecom—and was responsible for regulating internet access. It is fair to say that the role of the MIIT in regulating China’s internet has not been weakened obviously since 2014.

The above discussion indicates that the establishment of the CCSILG has not settled the problem of elite splits in China’s internet regulation. Although the CCSILG upgraded the CAC, the powers of the MPS and CPD have expended, and the MIIT has not been marginalized. The CAC still lacks absolute power to dominate China’s internet management. Overlapping roles and fragmented authority still exist at the state’s internet control. Therefore, in practice, internet control has remained incoherent and capricious since 2014.

However, the establishment of the CCSILG has increased the coordination of authority in China’s internet control. The CCSILG can function as an essential forum for negotiation among internet regulators. When running into considerable difficulty in

⁸² Xinhua, "Cpc Releases Plan on Deepening Reform of Party and State Institutions," 2018, accessed 16 December, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/21/c_137055471.htm.

coordinating other regulators, the CAC can directly report to leaders of the CCSILG. Then, the CCSILG can gather China's internet regulators under a higher-ranked authority. Also, the establishment of the CCSILG enable the CCP leaders, especially Xi Jinping, to intervene in an online political protest rapidly and effectively when necessary. Xi, as the leader of the CCSILG, can directly issue orders to the CAC. Put differently, the establishment of the CCSILG makes it easier for China's supreme leader to achieve his wishes in the process of controlling China's cyberspace.

All in all, Xi's administration attempted to centralize the authority in China's internet regulation by establishing the CCSILG. However, Xi's institutional reform has not changed the political structure of China's internet regulation. No regulators have been marginalized, and the CAC has not been delegated absolute power over internet regulation. Therefore, the divisions among China's internet regulators have not disappeared and as a consequence, internet control remains incoherent and capricious. Nevertheless, it is an undeniable fact that the establishment of the CCSILG has enhanced the coordination of authority. If ever the occasion arises when an online political protest begins to challenge the CCP's rule, China's top leadership can take command of the CAC and order all internet regulators to take united action against online activists.

4.5 Conclusion

In order to deal with potential political challenges presented by internet development, the Chinese government has introduced a series of strict measures. To start with, the Chinese government has maintained a firm grip on internet access. It uses the administrative licensing method to ensure that state-owned internet operators dominate internet-related infrastructure construction and operation. As a result, the Internet in China is built as an Intranet in a rigidly hierarchical structure rather than a decentralized data network. Secondly, Chinese authorities have imposed political control on online content. Internet regulators have generated a long list of sensitive topics and have banned most commercial

websites in China from gathering news and publishing independent reports. These websites are only allowed to distribute reports published by Chinese state-run media. Thirdly, the Chinese government has created a climate of self-censorship for individual internet users, ISPs, and ICPs. A significant role of self-censorship is to psychologically deter ICPs and individual internet users from disseminating information deemed illegal and harmful by the government before any punishment comes into play. Finally, there are a massive number of internet commentators employed by Chinese authorities to release misleading and deceptive comments and articles to manipulate public opinion.

Besides a comprehensive range of heavy-handed tactics and harsh measures, China's internet regulation regime also comprises many bureaucratic apparatuses. This Chapter identifies three groups of powerful regulatory agencies that dominated China's internet control before 2013: the first group was responsible for regulating and developing China's telecommunications industry, the second one was in charge of fighting cybercrimes and improving cybersecurity, and the third group took charge of online ideology-related work. However, in practice, these internet regulators had overlapping functions and diverging interests. The main duty of the MIIT was to promote the development of China's information industry, thereby resisting strict internet control. By contrast, the MPS and the CPD were prone to impose stringent political control on the Internet. The CAC could not effectively coordinate these powerful government agencies, which had the same administrative rank as the CAC in China's bureaucratic hierarchy. As a result, the contradictions among China's internet regulatory bodies were evident from the 1990s to 2013. Such contradictions and Websites' commercial interests rendered China's internet control capricious and incoherent. More often than not, whether the censoring rules were ruthless or loose depended on a particular case.

Since rising to power, Xi Jinping has taken active steps in addressing fragmented authority in China's internet control. He established a new supra-ministerial organization, the CCSILG, to cope with current issues of China's internet administration. However,

Xi's reform did not eliminate divisions among China's internet regulators. Consequently, internet control has remained incoherent and arbitrary. Admittedly, it is indisputable that the establishment of the CCSILG has enhanced the coordination of authority in China's internet control. This institutional restructuring has created a platform for China's internet regulators to negotiate and made sure that the CCP leadership could put these regulatory agencies in direct command if necessary.

Chapter 5: Online Protests Against Violent Police Enforcement: The Case Study of the Lei Yang Event

This chapter seeks to throw light on China's online political protests by analyzing an online protest against violent police enforcement—the Lei Yang event (雷洋事件). The issue of violent police enforcement has been a great cause for concern in China over the past decade. Online protests against violent police enforcement have become one of the most important types of online political protests in China. The Lei Yang event was the greatest online protest about violent police enforcement over the past ten years. As soon as the message of Lei Yang's mysterious death leaked out online on 9 May 2016, it generated public outrage and sparked a widespread online protest. Online activists, many of whom were middle-class Chinese, made comments, shared legal analyses, and published poetry to express their strong condemnation of police misconduct. However, 2016 was the year that the Chinese authorities enhanced control on the Internet.¹ It is perplexing that the scandal of police brutality quickly evolved into a widespread online political protest. Moreover, the online political protest suddenly died down under the conditions where the public outrage was spiking. The fact left the Lei Yang event more enigmatic.

The chapter addresses the question of why the Lei Yang event could take place during a situation in which the Chinese government was tightening internet control. Also, this chapter seeks to tackle the problem of why the online political protest ended suddenly before achieving its goals. This chapter argues that the POS, including elite divisions, internet control, influential allies, and online social networks, determined the emergence

¹ Xinhua Zhu, Yufeng Pan, and Xiaoran Chen, "2016 年中国互联网舆情分析报告 [China Internet Public Opinion Analysis Report (2016)] " in *Society of China Analysis and Forecast (2017)*, ed. Peilin Li, Guangjin Chen, and Yi Zhang (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2017), 229.

and development of the Lei Yang event. Specifically, elite divisions between the central government and the Beijing police had an important role in facilitating the event. Moreover, after the exposure of Lei's death, supervisors of Sina Weibo used flexible censoring rules to deal with protesters' posts and comments, which reduced the deterrent effect of internet control and created possibilities for the online political protest. Furthermore, lawyers, Big Vs, and some commercial media outlets constitute online protesters' allies. Their continued attention to the Lei Yang case brought it constantly into the public eye and affected many Sina Weibo users' decisions to engage in the online political protest. Finally, online social networks carried crucial implications for the emergence of the event. Internet users living in Beijing, Lei's alumni and friends, as well as many middle-class Chinese set up different groups over online social networks to protest the police. Nevertheless, the destruction of the POS finally led to the sudden end of the Lei Yang event, and, in consequence, the event did not bring about a meaningful impact on preventing China's violent police enforcement.

This chapter has four parts. The first section provides some background information about the Lei Yang event. The second section examines the four elements of the POS and analyzes how they facilitated the online political protest. The third section explains why the wave of the online political protest subsided all out of sudden. The fourth section concludes with some major findings and the discussion about the effects of online protests against violent police enforcement on China's political changes.

5.1 The Lei Yang Event: An Overview

On 7 May 2016, an unnatural death took place during a police raid in Changping (昌平), a suburb of Beijing (北京). The deceased was a 29-year-old young man named Lei Yang (雷洋). He was a native of southern China's Hunan province (湖南省). In 2005, Lei Yang went to Renmin University (人民大学), one of the top universities in China, and graduated with a master's degree in 2012. After graduation, he worked for China

Association of Circular Economy (中国循环经济协). According to its homepage, China Association of Circular Economy is under the administration of the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council (国务院国有资产监督管理委员会) and is guided by National Development and Reform Commission (国家发展与改革委员会) and other governmental departments.² It is safe to say that Lei was an urban white-collar worker with a decent job.

The news of Lei Yang's death spread from a post made by an internet user, named "Shanyangyue (山羊月)," on 9 May 2016. As one representative of Lei's classmates in Renmin University, Shanyangyue released the post—why did the man, holding a master's degree from Renmin University and having a newborn daughter, die bizarrely within an hour? (刚为人父的人大硕士，为何一小时内离奇死亡)—on Zhihu.com (知乎网), which is a popular website in China.³ The post brought the story of Lei's death into the open.

According to the post, the background information about Lei Yang's death is as follows. Lei Yang left his home between 8.30 and 9.00 pm on Saturday (May 7, 2016) to pick up his relatives from Beijing Airport, who had come from Lei's hometown to see his newborn baby. Lei's wife and other family members had been trying to call him during the period from 11.30 pm to 1.00 am the next morning, but they could not get through. Instead, they received a call from Changping police station of Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau (北京市公安局昌平分局) at 1.00 am on 8 May 2016. The police told them to come to the police station at once. They arrived at the police station at 1.30 am.

² China Association of Circular Economy, "Overview," <http://en.chinacace.org/about>.

³ The post has been deleted from Zhihu.com. For more on it, see: Shanyangyue, "刚为人父的人大硕士，为何一小时内离奇死亡? [Why Did the Man, Holding a Masters Degree from Renmin University and Having a Newborn Daughter, Die Bizarrely within an Hour?]," *China Digital Times*, 2018, accessed 12 June, 2018, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2016/05/%E5%B1%B1%E7%BE%8A%E6%9C%88-%E4%B8%BA%E4%BA%BA%E7%88%B6%E7%9A%84%E4%BA%BA%E5%A4%A7%E7%A1%95%E5%A3%AB-%E4%B8%BA%E4%BD%95%E4%B8%80%E5%B0%8F%E6%97%B6%E5%86%85%E7%A6%BB%E5%A5%87%E6%AD%BB%E4%BA%A1/>.

The Changping police told them that Lei Yang had been busted for visiting prostitutes and died of a heart attack on the way to the police station. Accompanied by the police, Lei's family members arrived at the hospital at about 4.30 am when they saw Lei's body. They found that Lei's arms and forehead were covered in bruises. The police explained that Lei fiercely resisted arrest and landed on his head when jumping from the car. Moreover, the police prevented Lei's family members from taking photos of Lei's body.

Apart from the description of Lei's death, Shanyangyue challenged the police's law enforcement and asked a series of questions in his post.⁴ First, Lei Yang played football almost every week. He was in good health and had no history of heart disease. So why did he die of a heart attack? Second, how did Lei Yang, forcefully controlled by the police, succeed in jumping from the car? Third, according to the Changping Hospital of Integrated Chinese and Western Medicine (昌平区中西医结合医院), Lei was admitted to the hospital at 10.09 pm and was dead on arrival. Why did the police not notify Lei's family members until 1.00 am the next morning? Finally, why did the police delete some location records from Lei's mobile phone?

The online protest staged by Lei's classmates quickly attracted a great deal of internet users' attention in several hours. In the meantime, the police in Changping made a response at 9.45 pm on the same day. They released a proclamation through its official Sina Weibo account, Ping'an Changping (平安昌平), to explain the death of Lei Yang. The proclamation stated that after receiving the report that a foot massage parlor was offering sex services, police officers took action quickly and caught six people suspected of whoring and prostitution.⁵ Moreover, in the proclamation, the police declared that:

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Pingan Changping (@平安昌平), "Sina Weibo Post," 2016, accessed July 4, 2016, https://www.weibo.com/5217409150/DuLLxxtX1?type=comment#_rnd1556771285743.

As Lei Yang, one of the suspects, fiercely resisted law enforcement and attempted to escape, police officers imposed coercive measures on him. When police officers tried to bring him back to the political station for further investigation, he suddenly fell ill. Law enforcement officers immediately rush him to the hospital, and he died in the hospital.⁶

As can be observed from Shanyangyue's post and the Changping police's proclamation, there were many contradictory statements between them. These inconsistencies received much attention from Chinese netizens and news media. More and more online activists suspected that Lei had suffered a violent police arrest and asked the police to present video evidence. On 11 May 2016, the Changping police released the second proclamation.⁷ First, the proclamation reaffirmed that Lei had patronized a prostitute. Second, it provided many details about how Lei resisted arrest and tried to flee. Thirdly, it stressed that the police's body-worn video dropped and smashed during the process of struggle, due to Lei's fierce resistance. Finally, the proclamation declared that Lei received hospital treatment at 10.05 pm and was officially confirmed dead at 10.55 pm. In short, the police made responses to prove that there was no misconduct on the part of the police. However, they failed to give convincing answers to the questions posed by the protesters; instead, they seemed to equivocate.

On the same day, Xing Yongrui (邢永瑞), who was the police officer leading the police raid against prostitution, gave China Central Television (CCTV, 中央电视台) a television interview. In the interview, Xing explained that his team did not carry a body-worn camera because they were plainclothes; besides, he declared that he tried to use his

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The post has been deleted by Ping'an Changping from its official Sina Weibo account. For more details of this proclamation, see Ye Lin and Ji Liu, "北京警方凌晨再次通报“雷洋事件” [the Changping Police Released the Second Proclamation on the Lei Yang Event]," *Sina*, 2018, accessed 16 July, 2018, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2016-05-11/doc-ixxyahs0667982.shtml>.

mobile phone to record their operation, but it was knocked out of his hands and broke when it hit the floor.⁸

In the second proclamation, the police declared that the body-worn video dropped and smashed during the struggle. However, Xing said that his team did not carry a body-worn camera because they were undercover, and he tried to use his mobile phone to record the course of law enforcement.⁹ The contradictory accounts made the public believe that the police's replies were far from the truth and they were likely to collude to cover up police brutality. The responses of the Changping police encountered widespread disbelief and generated public outrage. For instance, from 12 May 2016, more and more Lei's university alumni engaged in the online protest. They issued several strongly worded petition letters, calling for a full investigation of Lei's mysterious death. On 17 May 2016, Lei's family and their lawyers filed a complaint with Beijing Municipal People's Procuratorate (北京市人民检察, Beijing Procuratorate, in short), alleging that five law enforcement officers in Lei Yang case were suspected of committing intentional injury crime, abusing power, and forging evidence.¹⁰

Amid the public outcry against police brutality, the Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau published a statement on its official Weibo account on 19 May 2016, which claimed that:

The Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau attached great importance to the Lei Yang case. Shortly after the event, we instructed Changping police station to notify the procuratorate without delay and to cooperate with the investigation

⁸ China Central Television, "雷洋案当事民警忆经过: 其再次被控制后现异样 [the Lei Yang Case Was Recalled by the Police: He Was Physically Unwell after Being Controlled Again]," *Chinanews*, 2016, accessed 10 June, 2018, <http://www.chinanews.com/shipin/2016/05-11/news645862.shtml>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Caixin, "雷洋家属向北京市检报案 要求侦查涉事警察 [Lei's Family File a Complaint with Beijing Municipal People's Procuratorate, Requesting for Investigation of Five Law Enforcement Officers in Lei Yang Case]," 2016, accessed 10 May, 2018, <http://china.caixin.com/2016-05-17/100944286.html>.

actively. The police resolutely respect the facts and the law, decisively solve the case in accordance with the rules and regulations, and never conceal any faults.¹¹

Another development exciting online protesters was that Beijing Procuratorate decided to launch an independent investigation of five police officers involved in the unnatural death of Lei Yang. On its office Weibo account, Beijing Jiancha (北京检察), Beijing Procuratorate issued a statement on 1 June 2016, which claimed that the fourth branch of Beijing Procuratorate, also known as Fengtai (丰台) Procuratorate, was to have responsibility for the full-scale investigation into the related five police officers in Lei Yang case.¹²

The launch of the investigation, which was carried out by a third-party prosecuting authority, marked a preliminary victory for the online protest. At the beginning of the Lei Yang event, official announcements were only from the Changping police. Also, the probe into Lei's death was conducted by Beijing Changping Procuratorate, which was in the same jurisdiction as the Changping police. In this case, many perceived that it was difficult to ensure that the investigation was impartial. The online protest caused the Changping police to make a significant concession. The launch of the investigation implied that the procuratorate officially began to take legal proceedings against five police officers involved. A month later, the Fengtai Procuratorate published an autopsy report on Lei Yang on 30 June 2016. According to the report, Lei choked to death on his vomit. The report also pointed out that the policemen involved had performed

¹¹ Chinanews, "北京市公安局公开回应雷洋案：高度重视 绝不护短 [the Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau Publicly Responds to the Lei Yang Case: Pay Much Attention and Never Conceal Any Faults]," 2016, accessed 14 March, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/legal/2016-05/19/c_128997727.htm.

¹² Xinhua News Agency, "北京市检察机关依法决定对邢某某等五人立案侦查 [Beijing Municipal People's Procuratorate Decide to Conduct a Full-Scale Investigation into the Related Five Police Officers in Lei Yang Case]," *Xinhuanet*, 2016, accessed 5 June, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/legal/2016-06/01/c_1118969160.htm.

inappropriate actions during law enforcement and attempted to obstruct the investigation. Therefore, procurators decided to arrest two police officers for dereliction of duty.¹³

More than six months after Lei's death, Beijing Procuratorate finally released a report on the result of the investigation through its official Weibo account on 23 December 2016, stating that:

In order to control Lei Yang, five police officers grabbed his hair, wrapped his arm around his neck, and pressed down on his head and limbs [...] After finding Lei's abnormal physical responses, these officers did not rush Lei to a hospital or call for medical help immediately. Instead, they continue to use force to control Lei, so that emergency aid was delayed. Lei asphyxiated on the contents of his own stomach that entered his respiratory tract. The policing personnel involved did not carry out public duties according to the law. There was a direct causal relationship between unjustified police violence and the death of Lei. In addition, they deliberately fabricated facts, covered up the truth, and obstructed the investigation.¹⁴

Although the investigation revealed that the police officers had caused the death of Lei Yang, prosecutors would not indict them because they thought that the police officers' conduct was minor offenses and were able to repent them. A week later, on 29 December 2016, Beijing police declared that one police officer, Xing Yongrui, had been expelled from the CCP and been dismissed, that another policeman had been demoted and

¹³ "北京检方公布雷洋尸检鉴定意见 [Beijing Procuratorate Published an Autopsy Report on Lei Yang]," *Xinhuanet*, 2016, accessed 18 May, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/legal/2016-06/30/c_129104384.htm.

¹⁴ "雷洋案 5 名涉案者玩忽职守 北京检方就此答问 [the Five Police Officers Involved in the Case of Lei Yang Were Negligent in Their Duties the Beijing Prosecutor Answered This Question]," *Xinhuanet*, 2016, accessed 7 July, 2017, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/nd/2016-12-26/doc-ifyxyxury8702328.shtml>.

transferred to other position, and that three auxiliary policemen's labor contracts were terminated.¹⁵

The procuratorate's decision made China's cyberspace seethe with discontent. On Sina Weibo, millions of netizens denounced the decision, claiming that the punishment imposed on police officers involved was too slight. They were angry about the government's tolerance for police misconduct. Meanwhile, they tried to continue with protest to force Chinese authorities to reconsider the decision not to prosecute the five police officers. Nevertheless, China's internet regulators made a rapid move to crack down hard on online protesters and put information relating to the Lei Yang case on the list of politically sensitive content, which quelled the online political protest quickly.

All in all, Lei's family and classmates' challenge to police enforcement rapidly evolved into a nationwide online political protest. Online activists succeeded in compelling Beijing Procuratorate to launch a comprehensive investigation into Lei's death. Nonetheless, the procuratorate finally decided not to charge five police officers involved with a criminal offense. Although online activists were angry about the procuratorate's decision and tried to keep on protesting, the Lei Yang event suddenly ended. Why did the death of Lei Yang trigger a national online protest under the circumstances in which China's internet control was becoming stricter? What caused the sudden demise of the Lei Yang event? The following sections answer these questions by examining the rise and decline of the Lei Yang event.

5.2 The Rise of the Lei Yang Event

¹⁵ Peoples Daily Online, "雷洋案涉案警务人员和相关责任人受到党政纪处理 [Police Officers Involved in the Lei Yang Case Are Subject to the Party and Government Disciplines]," 2016, accessed 15 July, 2017, <http://legal.people.com.cn/n1/2016/1229/c42510-28987123.html>.

5.2.1 Elite Divisions in the Lei Yang Event

Divisions between the central government and the Changping police opened possibilities for the rise of the Lei Yang event. As discussed in Chapter Three, the core interest of China's central government is to maintain the regime's political legitimacy. Therefore, it often has low tolerance towards things that are likely to damage the political legitimacy. By contrast, local governments do not pay as much attention to political legitimacy as the central government does. To gain good prospects for career advancement, local officials always resort to any measure, sometimes illegal, to maximize their political performance. The serious wrongdoings of local officials are not acceptable to the central government because they can cause damage to the CCP's political legitimacy. In terms of the Lei Yang event, the central government and the Changping police had different positions on how to deal with the situation.

The Changping police attempted to cover up the circumstances around Lei's death. The mysterious death of Lei was closely linked to police brutality. After the disclosure of the fatality of Lei Yang, thousands of online activists expressed severe doubts as to whether law enforcement of the police was legal. However, the Changping police did not provide abundant evidence to dispel those doubts. Instead, their first response was to lie to the people and obscure the truth. It is a well-known fact that police officers in Beijing are equipped with video recording devices that enable them to record their activities and collect video evidence while enforcing the law. Video evidence was supposed to play a crucial role in defending five police officers involved against accusations of using undue violence. However, when protesters asked the Changping police to publish the video evidence, they claimed that the body-worn camera had dropped and smashed during the struggle. Some online activists soon pointed out that the body-worn camera equipped to the police was made of material that was difficult to break and sturdy enough to withstand falls. In this case, the Changping police made the second statement, claiming that those five police officers did not use a body-worn camera but a mobile phone was used to record

the process of law enforcement, and the mobile phone broke when it hit the floor. Inconsistency between the police's two statements left Lei's death more enigmatic and increased the protesters' mistrust in the police.

In addition, the Changping police station tried to divert public attention from the cause of Lei's death to his activity of having sex with a prostitute. The police allowed the arrested prostitute to attend a television interview, in which she admitted that she had provided Lei a hand job sex service in exchange for 200 Yuan. As Lei had died, what the lady said was just one side of the story. Furthermore, due to the fact that when accepting the television interview, the lady was still detained by the police, online protesters suspected that the police might have intimidated her into fabricating evidence. In general, the Changping police station strived to whitewash the unjustified law enforcement of the five police officers involved following the exposure of Lei's death.

What was the Changping police station's motivation for making frantic efforts to cover up for its staff? To shirk responsibilities may be a strong motivation. As early as 2003, the concept of official accountability (官员问责) began to spread in China. In that year, the then minister of health and the then mayor of Beijing suffered administrative punishment for a cover-up of the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) epidemic and their slow responses to fight the disease.¹⁶ Since then, the official accountability system has been introduced into China's political system to rein in officials' inappropriate or wrong behavior.¹⁷ Since Xi Jinping assumed power, the central government has attempted to implement the official accountability system more strictly. For example, on 10 November 2014, the State Council Information Office announced that China would set up a lifelong

¹⁶ The Telegraph, "China Sacks Health Minister over Sars," 2003, accessed 15 September, 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1427997/China-sacks-health-minister-over-Sars.html>.

¹⁷ Guangrong Xiao, "中国行政问责制存在的问题及对策研究 [the Problems Existing in Chinas Administrative Accountability System and Research on Countermeasures]," *China Public Administration*, no. 3 (2012).

accountability system for officials,¹⁸ which meant that government officials would be held accountable even after they changed jobs or retired.

In the Lei Yang case, the five policemen involved are members of the Changping police station, and the Changping police station is a branch of Beijing Public Security Bureau. Therefore, according to the official accountability system, if the five police officers had been found guilty of police brutality or manslaughter, not only the station inspector of the Changping station but also a deputy chief of Beijing Public Security Bureau might have been subject to official accountability. In this case, their promotion prospects would be blighted, with the result that they had high motivations for concealing policemen's illegal conduct, even though knowing that the cover-up of misconduct is also unlawful behavior.

Brutalities by the five police officers as well as the Changping police's deceptive practices tarnished the Chinese government's reputation. Therefore, no sooner had the death of Lei Yang been disclosed online than some central government departments presented themselves as being worried about and disgusted with police misconduct.

The dissatisfaction of China's Central Propaganda Department (CPD) over the Changping police can be recognized from news reports made by China's central media outlets. Shortly after Lei's family and classmates released a post online in protest at the Changping police, three central media outlets published hard-hitting editorials on their official websites and Sina Weibo to criticize the Changping police station. The Guangming Daily (光明日报) published an article on 10 May 2016, when a number of online protesters requested the Changping police to release law enforcement videos. The article expressed disapproval at the Changping police and pointed out that the response by the police did not sound logical and failed to respond appropriately to Lei's family's

¹⁸ China.Org, "China to Set up Lifelong Accountability System for Officials," 2015, accessed 15 May, 2018, http://china.org.cn/environment/2015-05/06/content_35501650.htm.

questions and the public appeal.¹⁹ On the same day, The People's Daily (人民日报) also ran a strongly worded editorial:

It is necessary for the police to release information in time, which helps to restore facts and respond to public concerns [...] However, such a brief statement published by the police cannot confirm the illegal acts of the parties and did not provide many vital factors such as the specific time, place, and process of the event. More importantly, there is a certain degree of discrepancy between the statements of Lei's family and the police. There are still some issues that need further clarification [...] Many details on this tragedy have yet to be further investigated by the relevant agencies to provide more evidence. Hope relevant agencies positively reply to the doubts of the deceased's family members.²⁰

Moreover, on 12 May 2016, Xinhua News Agency (新华社) successively published two editorials to cast doubt on the statements of the Changping police. The first editorial—The Official Announcement Cannot Fall Behind Public Opinion (权威发布不能落在舆情后面)—specifically criticized the Changping police's inappropriate handling of the crisis, pointing out that,

Obviously, the public, especially Lei's family members, are most concerned about what happened during the process from the arrest of Lei Yang to his death. This fact is crucial to determine what was the cause for his death and whether law enforcement is legal. The police's statement gave a lengthy description to confirm

¹⁹ Guangming online, "光明网: "人大硕士死亡" 官方回应含糊, 需要逻辑完整的答案 [Guangming Online: The Official Response to the "Renda Masters Death" Is Vague and a Logical Answer Is Required]," *China Daily*, 2016, accessed 16 June, 2017, http://cnews.chinadaily.com.cn/2016-05/11/content_25199563.htm.

²⁰ The People's Daily (@人民日报), "雷洋涉嫖被抓身亡: 以公开守护公正 [Lei Yang, Suspected of Going Whoring, Died While Detained: Protecting Justice with Information Disclosure]," 2016, accessed 3 August, 2017, <https://www.weibo.com/2803301701/DuSDf8Wux?sudaref=www.google.com.hk&display=0&retcode=6102&type=comment>.

Lei's whoring behavior, and it tried to show that Lei was quite familiar with that kind of whorehouses. Such statement did not appropriately respond to critical questions. Instead, it drew the event to the direction of exposing privacy and moral judgments.²¹

The second editorial—Gaining the Trust of the People by Voluntarily Disclosing Information (以有力信息公开取信于民)—had similarly harsh words for the police's responses.²² In short, two commentaries stressed that the police should provide more details of Lei's death to dispel the public's suspicions about police misconduct.

The Guangming Daily is a vice-ministerial level media outlet. The People's Daily and Xinhua News Agency are two ministry-level media outlets. All of them are essential components of China's propaganda system and are under the direct control of the CPD. Therefore, three central media outlets' hard-hitting editorials, to a great extent, demonstrated that the CPD disapproved of the way that the Changping police were behaving. Furthermore, China's central media outlets, serving as the CCP's mouthpiece, often voice the top leadership's points of view. For three consecutive days, three authoritative central media outlets blamed the Changping police, which can be regarded as a signal for the top leadership's deep concern over the Lei Yang case and dissatisfaction with the police.

More importantly, less than 2 weeks after the disclosure of Lei Yang's death, Xi Jinping, at the 24th meeting of the Central Leading Group for Deepening Overall Reform (中央全面深化改革领导小组) on 20 May 2016, emphasized that "law enforcement must be

²¹ Xinhua news Agency, "权威发布不能落在舆情后面 [the Official Announcement Cannot Fall Behind Public Opinion]," *Xinhuanet*, 2016, accessed 14 August, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/legal/2016-05/12/c_1118854762.htm.

²² "以有力信息公开取信于民 [Gaining the Trust of the People by Voluntarily Disclosing Information]," *Xinhuanet*, 2016, accessed 14 August, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/yuqing/2016-05/13/c_128979873.htm.

strictly supervised, and any outstanding problems currently existing in law enforcement must be solved, so to let Chinese people see the fairness and justice in the society through every law enforcement activity and every case handled.”²³ Since the online protest against the police violence was escalating, many observers saw Xi’s words as a reflection of the central government’s opinion towards the Lei Yang case.²⁴ Chen Youxi, the lawyer working for Lei’s family, said on a video that Xi Jinping and other top leaders were genuinely concerned about the Lei Yang event.²⁵ It is arguable that Chinese top leaders’ concern over the Lei Yang case, to some extent, indicated that they had recognized that the public’s mistrust of China’s police law enforcement was growing.

The critical attitude of Chinese central media outlets towards the Changping police, in some ways, legitimized internet users’ protest activities, which reduced the risk of involvement and mobilized more support for the Lei Yang event. For most Chinese ordinary citizens, the news report by China’s central media outlets is a direct channel to learn the central government’s intentions. Therefore, many ordinary netizens may have thought that the central government meant to punish severely any police officers found guilty of the abuse of power, and they may even feel as if the CCP’s top leadership wanted to rectify the public security system through the event. Consequently, they may have believed that it was not highly dangerous to engage in collective action protesting police brutality. Therefore, those editorials by the central media played an essential role in inspiring more internet users to engage in the online protest.

²³ Peoples Daily Online, "Don't Exploit Powers in the Name of Law Enforcement; Did You Hear What Xi Said, Police?," 2016, accessed 10 September, 2017, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0521/c90000-9061035.html>.

²⁴ Jiang Chuan, "习近平要求中国公安部门“解决执法突出问题” [Xi Jinping Requires the Public Security Apparatus to Solve Outstanding Problems in Law Enforcement]," *BBC Chinese*, 2016, accessed 12 July, 2017, http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/china/2016/05/160521_china_police_reform; Denyer, "A Young Man Died in Police Custody, and Middle-Class Chinese Are Outraged"; Xiangwei Wang, "A Young Life Lost: It's Time for Justice to Be Served," *South China Morning Post*, 2016, accessed 6 July, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1966336/young-life-lost-its-time-justice-be-served>.

²⁵ The video is released by boxuntv on YouTube. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOruv_2uCeM

From 10 May 2016, more and more Sina Weibo users started to make comments and forward those editorials to Changping police's official Sina Weibo account. For instance, a user, Bigbridge, forwarded one Xinhua News Agency's editorial to the Changping police and said that "I totally agreed with the editorial's opinion and you should provide more details about law enforcement as soon as possible."²⁶ Additionally, China's central media outlets' news reports on Lei Yang's death reassured commercial media outlets in China that topics on it were not politically sensitive. Put differently, China's commercial media felt that it was legal and safe to provide detailed coverage of the Lei Yang case. As a result, they stepped into the Lei Yang event after 10 May 2016. Section 5.2.3 shows that some commercial media became protesters' close allies. More significantly, the central media's intervention affected internet control over the Lei Yang event.

5.2.2 Capricious Internet Control

As discussed in Chapter 4, the power over the administration of China's cyberspace is concentrated in the hands of several state ministries. The implementation of internet control is prone to be affected by divisions among China's internet regulators. Regarding the Lei Yang event, it was because of conflicting bureaucratic interests between two relevant internet regulators, the CPD and the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), that there was no clear rule for censoring the event during a long period following the disclosure of Lei Yang's death. The level of internet control fluctuates constantly.

Not long after the exposure of Lei's death, internet control stepped in the event. At that moment, internet control manifested itself as the self-censorship by ICPs. As indicated in Chapter 4, China's ICPs have their own criteria for web content filtering so as to balance business interests and potential punishments. Several hours after Shanyangyue published his post, supervisors of Zhihu.com blocked it. Figure 5.1 displays a web supervisor's reply,

²⁶ Bigbridge (@Bigbridge), "Sina Weibo Post," 2016, collected by the author, on 15 May 2016 from FreeWeibo.

in which it is stated that the reason why Zhihu.com deleted the post was that it had involved political content that could not be discussed publicly.²⁷



Figure 5.1 The Reply of a Supervisor of Zhihu.com

Although Shanyangyue's post disappeared from Zhihu.com, many protesters shared the message about the death of Lei on other social media, especially Sina Weibo. Supervisors of Sina Weibo also deleted many comments and posts about the death of Lei, but they did not totally filter out the relevant information. In other words, they were more daring than supervisors of Zhihu.com and allowed some information to spread. Nevertheless, Sina Weibo's censorship of Lei's death stirred up many users' anger. For example, on 9 May 2016, a Sina Weibo user, named Sixsix (六六), complained that "I did not know why Sina Weibo repeatedly deleted posts about Lei's death. It might be related to the crime of deliberately killing someone!"²⁸ It is reasonable to assume that in order to protect itself from punishment, Sina Weibo may have continued to deal cautiously with contents about Lei's death and police brutality.

The intervention of the Chinese central media to provide coverage of the death of Lei Yang was a turning point in the Lei Yang event. After the central media outlets reported on Lei's death, Sina Weibo supervisors relaxed the censorship of the Lei Yang event. As

²⁷ The reply of a supervisor of Zhihu.com has been blocked. It was collected by the author on 9 May 2016, from zhihu.com.

²⁸ Sixsix (@六六), "Sina Weibo Post," 2016, collected by the author, on 3 March 2018 from FreeWeibo.

indicated before, the Guangming Daily, the People's Daily, and Xinhua News Agency had published strongly worded editorials to discuss the Changping police's faults on three successive days (from 10 to 12 May 2016). For China's ICPs, those editorials represented the closest reflections of official opinions, which can assure the legality of news coverage of Lei's death. From then, Sina Weibo's supervisors started to relax their supervision of the event. The increasing number of adverse comments appeared under the Changping police's official Sina Weibo account (平安昌平) after 10 May 2016. Besides, under posts of the People's Day and Xinhuanet, there were also substantial criticisms against the Changping police.

Although China's propaganda bureaucracies gave the Lei Yang event some endorsement, another internet regulatory agency, the MPS, was not likely to adopt the same standpoint as the propaganda apparatuses. As a member of the central government, the MPS has to maintain the CCP's political legitimacy. Thus, it is reasonable to believe that the MPS did not want to harbor those five unethical police officers. However, the MPS also did not hope that the protest over the Changping police continued to expand so that netizens might begin to attack the entire personnel of the public security system. On 26 May 2016, the MPS convened some central media, including the People's Daily and Xinhua News Agency, and some social media, like Sina Weibo, to attend an emergency meeting. At the meeting, an official stressed that the media should not publicize the Lei Yang event in an exaggerated way before the procurators published the final investigation and that the media should not deliberately make China's police seem guilty of abusing power.²⁹ The verbal instruction indicated that the MPS attempted to guide media reports about police brutality lest the scandal caused the situation to escalate. The verbal instruction may not

²⁹ Xingcao Guo, "中国公安部就雷洋案召集媒体引导舆论 [the Chinese Ministry of Public Security Convened the Media to Guide Public Opinion on the Lei Yang Case]," *Radio France Internationale*, 2016, accessed 2 May, 2018, <http://cn.rfi.fr/%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD/20160529-%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E5%85%AC%E5%AE%89%E9%83%A8%E5%B0%B1%E9%9B%B7%E6%B4%8B%E6%A1%88%E5%8F%AC%E9%9B%86%E5%AA%92%E4%BD%93%E5%BC%95%E5%AF%BC%E8%88%86%E8%AE%BA>.

necessarily have had an effect on China's central media because those central media outlets were not directly subject to the MPS.

Nevertheless, as for China's social media websites, they had to pay attention to the MPS's verbal instruction so as not to incur punishment. This is because the MPS is an influential internet regulator, and its internet police patrol the Internet in real time. In such circumstances, Sina Weibo adopted a flexible practice of censoring the Lei Yang case to avoid likely punishment from the internet police. It appeared to tighten control over some Big Vs in the wake of this meeting. Their remarks about Lei's death were sometimes blocked without reason. For instance, Chen Youxi, the lawyer working for Lei's family, complained that "in the past ten days, I have already had 187 draft posts that I cannot send out on Sina Weibo."³⁰ As for ordinary users, Sina Weibo's supervisors tended to turn a blind eye to their comments and discussions regarding the event.

Besides giving a verbal warning to China's social media websites, the police, in order to whitewash police misconduct, commanded the 50-cent army to sway online opinion by passing comments that unfairly supported the Changping police. The Changping police station released its first proclamation on Sina Weibo on 9 May 2016. This proclamation attracted a great number of comments from internet users. Most of the netizens commented adversely on the proclamation, but there were still many comments in favor of the police. Online protesters suspected that most commentators who had made favorable comments on the police's proclamation were 50-cent party. China Digital Times had recorded parts of 50-cent party. According to its investigation, these commentators generally chose six Chinese characters as usernames, used beautiful ladies as their profile photos, and repeatedly posted comments with the same content.³¹ Moreover, the

³⁰ Chen Youxi (@陈有西), "Sina Weibo Post," 2016, collected by the author, on 2 June 2016 from Sina Weibo.

³¹ Severdia Sandra, "昌平公安捧红了江苏徐州的“理想办公” [Changping Public Has Made the "Lixiang Bangong" of Xuzhou, Jiangsu Popular]," *China Digital Times*, 2016, accessed 5 May, 2018, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2016/05/%E3%80%90%E7%AB%8B%E6%AD%A4%E5%AD%98%E7%85%A7%E3%80%91%E6%98%8C%E5%B9%B3%E5%85%AC%E5%AE%89%E6%8D%A7%>

investigation demonstrated that all these commentators' workplace was a company named "Ideal Working" (理想办公) in Xuzhou City, Jiangsu Province.³² All these 50-cent party's comments can be summed up as one opinion that, regarding Lei's death, the police were not at fault, and that Lei Yang was immoral so that he had himself to blame.

Generally speaking, China's internet regulatory agencies did not reach a consensus on whether to treat the Lei Yang case as a politically sensitive topic or not. As a result, before receiving unified official instructions, supervisors of Sina Weibo used elastic censoring rules to balance self-censorship and commercial interests. Under such circumstances, the risk of taking part in the online political protest did not reach a prohibitive level. Flexible internet control created chances for the Lei Yang event.

5.2.3 Influential Allies in the Lei Yang Event

As discussed in Chapter 2, influential allies are famous persons or organizations. They are able to mobilize protest action by offering specialized knowledge in a particular subject or economic support for protests, which reduces the cost and risk of participating in collective action. In the Lei Yang event, lawyers, internet celebrities, and commercial media outlets were allies of the online protesters.

First, the death of Lei Yang drew much attention from lawyers. Even corporate lawyers, who usually pay scant attention to cases related to social justice, started to concern themselves about the Lei Yang case.³³ Lawyers played an essential role in facilitating the online political protest by offering legal advice on how to question the police. Soon after Lei Yang's death was exposed online, there were some lawyers publicly stating on Sina

E7%BA%A2%E4%BA%86%E6%B1%9F%E8%8B%8F%E5%BE%90%E5%B7%9E%E7%9A%84%E7%90%86%E6%83%B3%E5%8A%9E/.

³² Ibid.

³³ Gerry Shih, "Chinese Middle Class in Uproar over Alleged Police Brutality," *Associated Press News*, 2016, accessed 6 June, 2018, <https://apnews.com/1639874363d24884a42bafec68b62cd8>.

Weibo that they were willing to provide free legal aid to Lei Yang's family. For instance, on 10 May 2016, Ganyuanchu Lawyer (甘元春律师) wrote on Sina Weibo that "Lei Yang's hometown is Li County in Hunan province. I, as his fellow countryman, would like to offer free legal services to Lei's family members. If someone knows them, please inform them on my behalf."³⁴ It is worth mentioning that, among these solicitors, Chen Youxi is the most important one. Chen Youxi is a well-known Chinese lawyer specializing in criminal law and a partner of Capital Equity Legal Group. Chen spoke for Lei Yang's family members in legal matters. He was one of the lawyers who first questioned if the police's enforcement was proper. On 11 May 2016, Chen stated on Sina Weibo that:

Plainclothes police officers of Changping branch have been suspected of crime. They must be treated as targets of the investigation. 1) This announcement, in turn, confirmed the cause why law enforcement officers employed excessive violence in the process of making the arrest. 2) Even if Lei Yang had used prostitutes, he did not commit any crime, for whoring is not criminal activity in China. 3) The statement that Lei Yang had visited prostitutes was made by suspects, the police officers involved. It cannot rule out the possibility that police officers attempted to produce false evidence against Lei Yang. 4) The police can put a whoremaster under administrative detention on condition that they have got a warrant for detention. Did plainclothes police officers get a warrant for detaining Lei Yang? 5) Lei Yang had always been perfectly healthy before he died. His sudden unexpected death should be the focus of the investigation. 6) The Changping police arrested the entire staff of the foot massage parlor. It is more than likely that the police officers induced and intimidated them to cover up the truth. 7) The

³⁴ Ganyuanchu Lawyer (@甘元春律师), "Sina Weibo Post," 2016, collected by the author, on 10 May 2018, from FreeWeibo.

Changping police station should evade investigation of the case. There is a need for a third party to investigate the case.³⁵

On 13 May 2016, Chen Youxi officially became one of the legal representatives of Lei's family. In the following days, Chen represented Lei's family to issue public statements multiple times. His remarks about Lei's case mobilized many lawyers. They shared Chen's posts and comments with friends through online social networks. Especially when Chen had become the critical target of internet censorship after the MPS attempted to restrict access to information about police brutality, they came forward with help. On Sina Weibo, some of them publicly condemned the government for restricting Chen's speech, while others tried to spread Chen's statements so widely as possible.

Second, many internet celebrities spoke on Sina Weibo in support of Lei Yang's family members. As discussed in Chapter Three, Sina Weibo celebrities, also known as Big Vs, often have millions of followers on Sina Weibo. Their posts and remarks will show up on their followers' timeline automatically. In other words, Big Vs can help to speed up the dissemination of information. Moreover, many of them have reputations for honesty and righteousness and are able to affect the attitudes and behavior of followers. At the beginning of the Lei Yang event, they helped to spread information and identify the core issues relating to the event. For example, Zhang Ming (张鸣), a professor at Renmin University of China, has 1.05 million fans on Sina Weibo. On 16 May 2016, he posted an article on Sina Weibo—The Survival Warning of Lei Yang's Death (雷洋之死的生存警告)—in which He wrote that:

More and more people are asking a question—how did Lei Yang die? [...] however, the police never told us the cause of death for Lei Yang; instead, the police repeatedly stressed that Lei had visited prostitutes [...] By now, we have

³⁵ Chen Youxi (@陈有西), "The Changping Police Has Been Already Suspected of Committing a Crime," 2016, collected by the author, on 12 May 2016 from Sina Weibo.

not known the truth. Still, the police's responses make people feel that their attitude is very arrogant. Although having been under suspicion and investigation, the police are still publishing announcements [...] To some extent, all of us may become the next Lei Yang in the future. Even if the police have become elephants, I do not want to be a tuft of trampled grass.³⁶

The feeling expressed in Zhang's article struck a chord with a considerable number of internet users. According to an analysis report by Gsdata (清博大数据), which is a Chinese public opinion monitoring company, the article was read more than one hundred thousand times in a short period.³⁷

Additionally, some famous media professionals played an instrumental role in keeping the Lei Yang case dominating the headlines. For example, on 12 May 2016, Wang Zhian (王志安), a well-known investigative reporter, wrote on Sina Weibo that:

The issues that we should discuss in the Lei Yang case are: Can the police subpoena a person suspected of patronizing a prostitute? Can the police adopt compulsory measures, if the person disobeys the police's order? [...] Are the police responsible for the death of the criminal suspect, if the suspect has a certain disease?³⁸

As he had 1.97 million followers on Sina Weibo, Wang Zhian functioned like a national newspaper to provide news and information concerning Lei's death for millions of people in time. Yang Jinlin (杨锦麟), having 3.94 million followers on Sin Weibo, is another

³⁶ Zhang Ming (@张鸣), "Sina Weibo Post," 2016, collected by the author, on 16 May 2016, from Sina Weibo.

³⁷ Gsdata, "“雷洋”罗生门：大数据告诉你有多少种谎言 ["Leiyang" Rashomon: Big Data Tells You How Many Kinds of Lies]," 2016, accessed 25 May, 2017, <http://home.gsdata.cn/news-report/data-analyze/825.html>.

³⁸ Wang Zhian (@王志安), "Sina Weibo Post," 2016, collected by the author, on 3 June 2018, from FreeWeibo.

example. With regard to the Lei Yang event, he wrote comments and shared articles 16 times in succession.³⁹

After 30 June 2016, there was no further report about the progress in the Lei Yang case. It seemed that the case reached a stalemate. During the long period of waiting for the procurators' final investigation, many Big Vs called on the public to not forget the case. For instance, in order to prevent the case from fading out the public concern, Yu Jianrong (于建嵘), a prominent Chinese scholar having 2.94 million followers on Sina Weibo, spoke on 3 September 2016 that "reportedly, an important person (Xi Jinping) made an important instruction that the Lei Yang case should be settled legally and openly. A long time has passed. I am not sure if he still remembers the case. For me, I am going to forget it soon."⁴⁰

Last but not least, many commercial media outlets, driven by commercial profits, investigated the death of Lei Yang. The possibility cannot be ruled out that they really sympathized with Lei's family. They continued to publish follow-up reports on the progress of the Lei Yang case, which helped to restore the truth of Lei's death and draw the public's attention to the case.

On 9 May 2016, many commercial media outlets, such as ifeng.com (凤凰网), The Paper (澎湃新闻), Caixin.com (财新), and so forth, made reports on Lei Yang's death and the Changping police's response. For example, on its Sina Weibo account, The Paper published its report—The Changping Police: A Man was Detained on Suspicion Of Going Whoring at a Foot Parlor and Died Due to Poor Health (北京昌平警方：一男子涉嫖娼

³⁹ Yang Jinlin (@杨锦麟), "Sina Weibo Post," 2016, collected by the author, on 3 June 2018, from FreeWeibo.

⁴⁰ Yu Jianrong (@于建嵘), "Sina Weibo Post," 2016, collected by the author, on 3 June 2018, from FreeWeibo.

被带走时身体不适医治无效死亡).⁴¹ Caixin.com gave a similar coverage of the death of Lei—A Young Scholar Suspected of Patronizing a Prostitute Died in Detention and The Procuratorate has Stepped into the Investigation (青年学者“涉嫖”被抓途中死 检察院已介入调查).⁴² Generally speaking, these reports were a basic description of Lei Yang's death, and commercial media outlets did not provide their points of view on the event.

As mentioned before, the turning point came when China's central media, including the People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency, and CCTV, engaged in the Lei Yang event on 10 May 2016. Editorials made by them put a different complexion on the event. After 10 May, many commercial media outlets started to publish editorials to express their opinions on the Lei Yang case. For instance, on 10 May 2016, ifeng.com published an article on Sina Weibo—Who Will Be Responsible for the Unnatural Death of Lei Yang (谁来为人大硕士雷洋的非正常死亡负责)—and wrote that “in the course of the arrest and interrogation, the police should have surveillance videos. Was there any improper law enforcement by the police? What happened within an hour of the arrest and interrogation?”⁴³ In a similar vein, Beijing News released an article on Sina Weibo—What Kind of Truth Does the Lei Yang Case Need (雷洋案需要什么样的真相), which expressed serious doubts about the Changping police. These articles drew a big audience and elicited enormous comments on Sina Weibo.

Moreover, some commercial media launched independent inquiries into the death of Lei Yang. There exists fierce competition among China's commercial media outlets. It is more

⁴¹ Kuanwei Zhou and Chunfeng Zheng, "警方：涉嫖娼带走时身体不适不治 [the Changping Police: A Man Was Detained on Suspicion of Going Whoring at a Foot Parlour and Died Due to Poor Health]," *The Paper*, 2016, accessed 2 June, 2018, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1467037.

⁴² Yuxiao Shan, "雷洋家属向北京市检报案 要求侦查涉事警察 [Lei Yang's Family Reported to the Beijing Municipal Procuratorate and Asked to Investigate the Police Involved]," *Caixin*, 2016, accessed 10 October, 2017, <http://china.caixin.com/2016-05-17/100944286.html>.

⁴³ Zongming She, "谁来为人大硕士雷洋的非正常死亡负责 [Who Will Be Responsible for the Unnatural Death of Lei Yang]," *IFENG*, 2016, https://www.weibo.com/2615417307/DuQk59lNX?type=comment#_rnd1561594657136.

than likely that commercial media outlets which release news reports with imagery contents to provide more details about the death of Lei Yang could attract more audience and extend their social influence. On 10 May 2016, Caixin.com interviewed eyewitnesses and reported that on the day of the incident, there were closed-circuit television cameras in the neighborhood, but community guards said that they could not provide video recordings because the cameras were broken.⁴⁴ On 11 May 2016, Beijing News published an in-depth report—The Journalist Visited the Scene of the Event at Night and Interviewed the Man Who Reported the Event to the Police: Lei Yang Had Called for Help, Saying the Law Enforcement Officers are Not Real Cops (记者夜访事发地遇报警者：雷洋以为查处者不是警察曾呼救).⁴⁵ The news coverage contained video content and used a map to show the direction and line along which Lei moved. Similarly, Tencent News (腾讯新闻) also employed imagery contents to restore the process of arresting Lei Yang. It published a five-minute video, which contained interviews with witnesses to the Lei Yang death and included a video clip captured by a witness on which Lei was calling for help.⁴⁶ Having vivid descriptions of the process of Lei Yang's death, these reports were widely reposted by their Sina Weibo followers and became significant evidence for online protesters to challenge the Changping police. In short, it is fair to say that the reports provided by commercial media made news of Lei Yang's death grab the headline and mobilized millions of online activists to engage in protest against the Changping police.

⁴⁴ Caixin (@财新网), "Sina Weibo Post," 2016, https://www.weibo.com/1663937380/DuU8a5q7t?refer_flag=1001030103_&type=comment#_rnd1561594977413.

⁴⁵ Feiran Lin et al., "记者夜访事发地遇报警者：雷洋以为查处者不是警察曾呼救 [the Journalist Visited the Scene of the Event at Night and Interviewed the Man Who Reported the Event to the Police: Lei Yang Had Called for Help, Saying the Law Enforcement Officers Are Not Real Cops]," *Beijing News*, 2016, accessed 6 June, 2018, <http://www.bjnews.com.cn/news/2016/05/11/402955.html>.

⁴⁶ Tencent news, "网友拍摄雷洋被抓视频曝光 上车前不断大声求救 [the Exposure of Netizens Video Which Showing Lei Yang Was Shouting for Help When Being Caught]," 2016, accessed 6 May, 2018, <https://v.qq.com/x/cover/pevi81lpi14li4l/o0020jiyj6q.html>.

In short, influential allies affected many internet users' decisions to participate in the Lei Yang event. Many lawyers provided protesters with legal advice on how to question the police. Also, many Big Vs came out in support of Lei Yang's family members. Big Vs wielded their influence to mobilize potential protesters by spreading information and shaping public opinions. More importantly, commercial digital media played a pivotal role in helping the online political protest develop. Their news reports helped to draw the public's attention to the death of Lei, which put the police under considerable pressure.

5.2.4 Online Social Networks in the Lei Yang Event

Chapter 3 has demonstrated that the technological features of Sina Weibo have facilitated connections among netizens. In the Lei Yang event, follower relations on Sina Weibo are serving as a crucial means of diffusing and collecting information. Besides, these online social networks contributed to the formation of collective identity.

5.2.4.1 Facilitating the dissemination of information

Much information about Lei Yang's unnatural death was rapidly brought to almost all users through social networks on Sina Weibo. According to a research report issued by Qingbo bigdata, by 12 May 2016, there were 1079 articles relating to the Lei Yang case, which had been read more than 6.89 million times, and 16 of them had over 100,000 page views.⁴⁷ Via these online social networks, not only official reports but also unofficial information about Lei's death flowed on Sina Weibo swiftly and widely. For one thing, government agencies used their Sina Weibo official accounts to promote the dissemination of official reports. These official accounts of government agencies typically have a vast number of followers. Posts made by official accounts often attract considerable comments and are likely to be reposted by their followers. For example,

⁴⁷ Gsdata, "“雷洋”罗生门：大数据告诉你有多少种谎言 [“Leiyang” Rashomon: Big Data Tells You How Many Kinds of Lies]”.

Ping'an Changping (平安昌平) and Beijing Jiancha (北京检察) functioned as important sources of information about Lei's death, and their posts had received a great number of comments during the Lei Yang event.

For another thing, online protesters also provided plenty of unofficial information about Lei's death. Online social networks enabled online activists to become alternative sources of information about Lei's death. Not long after Shanyangyue (山羊月) released the post about the death of Lei on Zhihu.com, online activists began to diffuse related information on Sina Weibo. By virtue of online activists' social networks, a considerable amount of user-generated content (UGC) was widely delivered across Sina Weibo. For instance, on 11 May 2016, a Sina Weibo user, Shangjieli (上街里), provided a video in which Lei was struggling with the police officers and calling for help. The video soon attracted an enormous number of followers. According to a research report issued by Eagle-eye Media Opinion Monitoring Office (鹰眼舆情观察室), which is a Chinese public opinion monitoring company, the video had been reposted 4572 times and watched 13.896 million times by 20 May 2016.⁴⁸ In brief, by leveraging online social networks, online activists soon made Lei's death become a matter of considerable public concern.

5.2.4.2 The construction of collective identity

Online social networks have promoted the construction of collective identity. As discussed in Chapter 2, collective identity is a strong incentive, which encourages individuals to engage in collective action; furthermore, it is the process in which participants interact with each other to affirm who they are, what they do together, and why. To forge collective identity, protesters must work together to mark group boundaries by constructing a "We" against those they consider to be antagonists. Furthermore, they have to affirm collective goals they strive for and attach meaning to their collective action.

⁴⁸ Eagle-eye Media Opinion Monitoring Office, "人大硕士雷洋涉嫖被抓后死亡," *EEFUNG Software*, 2016, accessed 28 May, 2018, <http://www.eefung.com/hot-report/20160520094812-31436>.

In the Lei Yang event, online social networks speeded up the formation of collective identity.

As soon as news of Lei's death appeared online, social networks on Sina Weibo rapidly brought together a large number of isolated netizens who were sympathetic to Lei Yang. They interacted with each other on Sina Weibo and came to recognize themselves as different cohesive groups according to some common features, such as being from the same geographical area, having similar life experiences, or holding similar political standpoints. In general, there were three types of collective identity.

First of all, a vast number of internet users living in Beijing gathered on Sina Weibo to protest the Changping police. For instance, after the Changping police released its first proclamation on Sina Weibo, many Sina Weibo users began to follow its official Weibo account and came to make comments about the proclamation to express anger and frustration. One Beijing Weibo user, Justin2011, wrote that "I am so surprised that such police misconduct happened around my home. I often pass by that massage parlor. I am glad to still be alive. I have a terrible feeling that the police are trying to cover up misconduct. The distrust in the government is growing."⁴⁹ Unlike face-to-face conversation, which can be only known by a few people, his comment could be seen by all Weibo users who followed the Changping police's Sina Weibo account. The comment aroused widespread sympathies, receiving 8796 likes by 13 May 2016. In addition, many Sina Weibo users made replies to Justin2011's comment. A Weibo user living in Beijing, Mengmengdao (梦梦岛), replied that:

I have lived in Beijing for many years. The Beijing police's violent law enforcement is not new, but the death of Lei and the Changping police's responses to it have really shaken my confidence in personal safety. I think the incident is

⁴⁹ Justin2011(@Justin2011), "Sina Weibo Post," 2016, collected by the author, on 11 May 2016, from Sina Weibo.

going to have long-term effects on how people are seeing the Beijing police. We should ask Changping police to restore the full truth by showing video evidence.⁵⁰

Mengmengdao's reply also received 3578 likes. The Justin2011's comment contributed to a shared sense of identity—collective identity based geographical proximity—among followers of the Changping police's official Weibo account.

This type of collective identity can also be observed in other places. For instance, numerous similar online conversations took place below the official Weibo accounts of the People's Daily, Beijing News, Caixin.com, and so forth. A research report made by Eagle-eye Media Opinion Monitoring Office proved the existence of this type of collective identity. According to the research report, internet users living in Beijing were most concerned about the death of Lei.⁵¹ In summary, many Beijing users quickly rallied on Sina Weibo to express doubt about whether the law enforcement of the Changping police was legal and proper. Additionally, out of concern about their living environment, they asked the Beijing police to punish severely police officers who violated the law or endanger public safety while enforcing the law.

Second, online social networks linked together many of Lei's alumni to speak out against the Changping police. This was the first time collective identity based on alumni had emerged in China's online political protests. Wu Qiang, a scholar at the School of Humanities of Tsinghua University, regarded the Lei Yang event as the rise of the alumni movement in China.⁵² Following the exposure of the Lei Yang's death, some Lei's university alumni converted the textual post by Shangyangyue to an image and started to

⁵⁰ Mengmengdao (@梦梦岛), "Sina Weibo Post," 2016, collected by the author, on 12 May, from Sina Weibo.

⁵¹ Eagle-eye Media Opinion Monitoring Office, "人大硕士雷洋涉嫖被抓后死亡".

⁵² Qiang Wu, "雷洋案没有结束——人民大学与中国校友运动的兴起 [the Leiyang Case Is Not over - the Rise of Renmin University and the Chinese Alumni Movement]," *Initium Media*, 2016, accessed 15 July, 2019, <https://theinitium.com/article/20161229-opinion-wuqiang-leiyang/>.

diffuse it on Sina Weibo. On 9 May 2016, one Weibo user, Jiujiangzilei(啾酱紫嘞), wrote that:

This is a true story. I'm Lei Yang's high school alumna. I repost this photo and hope influential friends in Beijing might help Lei's family. Lei Yang and his wife used to be excellent students in my school [...] I am very sad to hear the bad news and hope that Beijing police can do justice to Lei's family.⁵³

On the same day, another Weibo user, Menglu-cong (梦路-聪) stated that "I was Lei's college roomie and we studied under the same supervisor. He became a father to a baby girl just a few days ago. I am very grieved at the tragedy. I implore you guys to repost my micro-blog and support Lei's family."⁵⁴ Besides the two alumni, there were many others who spread related information on Weibo. Consequently, information about Lei's death swiftly flowed through his college alumni's online social networks, so that more and more Renmin University alumni received the news.

Around 12 May 2016, a strongly worded petition letter written by Lei's university alumni from the class of 1988 appeared on Sina Weibo. The title of the letter was "Statement by Some 1988 Alumni of Renmin University of China on Fellow Student Lei Yang's Death (中国人民大学 88 级部分校友就雷洋同学意外身亡的声明)."⁵⁵ One author of the online petition letter told journalists that "since the occurrence of the Lei Yang case, many college alumni have paid much attention to it. Hundreds of alumni participated in the discussion about the event through social media. The letter is the result of group

⁵³ Jiujiangzilei(@啾酱紫嘞), "Sina Weibo Post," 2016, collected by the author, on 20 May 2018, from FreeWeibo.

⁵⁴ Menglu-cong (@梦路-聪), "Sina Weibo Post," 2016, collected by the author, on 20 May 2018, from FreeWeibo.

⁵⁵ Yu Wang, "人大多名校友发公开信 质疑昌平警方执法程序 [Several Alumni of Renmin University of China Published Petition Letter to Question the Law Enforcement Conducted by the Changping Police]," *Sina News*, 2016, accessed 26 May, 2018, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/nd/2016-05-11/doc-ifxryhhh1930410.shtml>.

discussion.”⁵⁶ It is fair to say that the public letter is a clear manifestation of collective consciousness. In the online petition letter, Lei’s university alumni identified collective goals they wanted to achieve and attached significance to the Lei Yang event. Here are translated excerpts from the letter, which appeared on Sina Weibo but was deleted later:

As senior fellow students of Lei Yang, we have been working hard for many years amid the waves of reform and opening-up. Most of our fellow alumni can be found in various specialty areas like Lei Yang, but they dare not call themselves the elite of society. We painfully feel that today, more than 30 years after the reform and opening-up, our personal safety and civil rights have not been guaranteed [...] So, the death of Lei Yang was by no means an accident. It was a tragedy arising from the system. We call on the top authorities to conduct an independent and impartial investigation into Lei Yang’s death. We demand that his killers be severely punished and that discipline within the public security departments be corrected. We want our most basic rights to personal safety, civil rights, and urban order.⁵⁷

The online petition letter was a collective voice, which, in some ways, marked the formation of collective identity. In spite of internet censorship and potential punishment, encouraged by the collective identity, 132 of Lei’s university alumni from the class of 1977 and 1978 also issued a real-name online statement, *We Must Speak Out—Statement by Some 1977 and 1978 Alumni of Renmin University of China on Fellow Student Lei Yang’s Death* (我们不得不发声—中国人民大学 77、78 级部分校友关于雷洋事件的声明). In the statement, they expressed strong dissatisfaction with the police and called on more Renmin University alumni to participate in the protest.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Didi Kirsten Tatlow, "Chinese Man’s Death in Custody Prompts Suspicion of Police Brutality," *The New York Times*, 2016, accessed 8 June, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/13/world/asia/china-lei-yang-police-death.html>.

⁵⁸ Yan Hai, "人大多届校友联署呼吁独立公正调查雷洋案 [Alumni of Renmin University of China Have Called for an Independent and Impartial Investigation into the Leiyang Case]," *Voice of America*, 2016, <https://www.voachinese.com/a/leiyang-20160512/3327057.html>.

Last but not least, it is worth noting that Renmin University alumni engaging in the online political protest had a visible status symbol, which was being Chinese middle class. There is no concise definition of the Chinese middle class. More often than not, those who are urban professionals, well-educated, living a modern lifestyle are considered to be a middle-class Chinese.⁵⁹ Lei Yang was a graduate of the prestigious Renmin University of China and worked for a state-backed public institution in Beijing, and most of his college alumni were in similar situations. Therefore, they can be seen as middle-class Chinese. Moreover, the Renmin University alumni's protest action won considerable public sympathy from other urban white-collar workers. They reposted the petition letters and made comments to give personal opinions. For example, one Weibo user, Qilian (七连), wrote that "as a petty office worker, I do not care about the ownership of the Diaoyu Islands and the political status of Taiwan, because I am not a politician [...] I am only concerned about how Lei Yang died. The event is too close to me. I am afraid I may be the next Lei yang."⁶⁰

China's top leaders may have perceived the Chinese middle class's anger and anxiety. As mentioned in Section 5.2.1, on 20 May 2016, Xi Jinping publicly emphasized the importance of strict supervision for police powers. Xi's speech was just about one week later than Renmin University alumni's online petition letters. It seems probable that Xi wanted to use the speech to appease those restless middle-class Chinese because the Chinese middle class's involvement had particular significance. In China, middle-class Chinese are a social group that cannot be easily mobilized to participate in social movements. Many scholars have argued that China's middle class is a political ally of Chinese authorities and have an important political role in maintaining sociopolitical

⁵⁹ Qiqing Lin, "China's Middle Class Comes with New Characteristics," *Six Tone*, 2017, accessed 25 May, 2018, <http://www.sixtone.com/news/1000610/chinas-middle-class-comes-with-new-characteristics>.

⁶⁰ Qilian (@七连), "Sina Weibo Post," 2016, collected by the author, on 27 May 2016, from Sina Weibo.

stability.⁶¹ For example, Luigi Tomba, a professor at the China Studies Centre of University of Sydney, points out that “the middle class remains deeply intertwined with the destinies of China’s political and economic elite and it is perceived as a force for social stability rather than one for political change.”⁶²

Nevertheless, the fact that groups of Renmin University alumni publicly protested against government agencies, to some extent, indicated that the political role of the Chinese middle class was beginning to shift. The death of Lei clearly showed that middle class Chinese were vulnerable when faced with the abuse of power by police officers. As a result, Lei’s death forced them, who usually concentrate their efforts on financial management and creating their own cosy homes, into concerning themselves about the deteriorating legal situations. These restless middle-class Chinese ascribed the death of Lei Yang to unchecked police powers. They not only tried to get justice for Lei but also started to appeal to the Chinese government to strengthen the rule of law. Therefore, the CCP leadership’s attention to the Lei Yang case may have been as a result of the Chinese middle class’s involvement.

In brief, online social networks played a crucial part in facilitating political mobilization by promoting the dissemination of information and shaping collective identity in the Lei Yang event. Online social networks made it easier for atomized individuals with shared characteristics to come together and form challenging groups with agreed interests. Internet users living in Beijing, Lei’s alumni and friends, as well as middle class Chinese living in different cities, made up the main participants in the Lei Yang event. The involvement of the middle class increased the likelihood that the event would attract the Chinese leaders’ attention.

⁶¹ Cheng Li, "Chinese Scholarship on the Middle Class: From Social Stratification to Political Potential," in *China's Emerging Middle Class*, ed. Cheng Li, Beyond Economic Transformation (Brookings Institution Press, 2010), 72.

⁶² Luigi Tomba, "Middle Classes in China: Force for Political Change or Guarantee of Stability?," *Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 6, no. 2 (2009).

To conclude, divisions between the central government and the Changping police played the most important role in the Lei Yang event. Divisions between them made it necessary for the central government to intervene in this police brutality scandal. The editorials from central media outlets indicated the dissatisfaction of the CPD and even China's top leaders with the Changping police. These editorials mobilized more internet users to participate in the Lei Yang event. Moreover, disagreements between the CPD and the MPS made Sina Weibo's supervisors adopt flexible self-censorship about the Lei Yang case, which opened possibilities for online protesters. In addition, the CPD's endorsement of the Lei Yang case encouraged China's commercial media outlets to give massive coverage of the police brutality scandal, so that the scandal grabbed the headlines on Sina Weibo many times. Finally, online social networks carried considerable weight in the event. The essential roles of online social networks in promoting the Lei Yang event manifested themselves in two aspects: facilitating the dissemination of information and the construction of collective identity.

5.3 The Cause of the Decline of the Lei Yang Event

Seven months after Lei Yang's death, on 23 December 2016, the Fengtai Procuratorate announced that they had decided not to prosecute the police officers involved because their offenses were minor and they were able to acknowledge and repent their crimes. The procuratorate's decision infuriated online protesters. They strived to continue protesting to compel Chinese authorities to withdraw the decision and impose severe penalties on the police officers involved.

Thousands of former students of Renmin University and other top universities signed online petitions to express opposition to the procuratorate's decision. On 24 December 2016, some Renmin University alumni launched a protest petition on Sina Weibo. In the petition letter (see Figure 5.2), they declared that "the decision violated Chinese law. We

do not agree with, recognize, and accept the decision.”⁶³ In the following three days, the petition has gathered more than 2,400 signatories. Apart from Lei Yang’s university alumni, many of them are alumni of China’s other top universities, such as Tsinghua University, Peking University, and Zhejiang University.⁶⁴



Figure 5.2 Petition Letter by Renmin University Alumni on Sina Weibo

In addition to the university alumni, a host of ordinary Sina Weibo users made efforts to ratchet up the online political protests. For example, to remind people that misconduct conducted by the Changping police was not minor, a Sina Weibo user, Longyitian (龙易天), marked these crimes mentioned in prosecutors’ investigation report in red. Then, he posted the photo (see Figure 5.3) on Sina Weibo, claiming that “it is incredible that the

⁶³ Delie An, "雷洋案远没有结束 [the Lei Yang Case Is Far from over]," *Radio France Internationale*, 2016, accessed 15 June, 2018, <http://cn.rfi.fr/%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD/20161230-%E9%9B%B7%E6%B4%8B%E6%A1%88%E8%BF%9C%E6%B2%A1%E6%9C%89%E7%BB%93%E6%9D%9F>.

⁶⁴ Shih, "Chinese Middle Class in Uproar over Alleged Police Brutality".

police officers involved are subject to the exemption from prosecution [...] What an evil regime it is! The law is dead, and God is dead.”⁶⁵

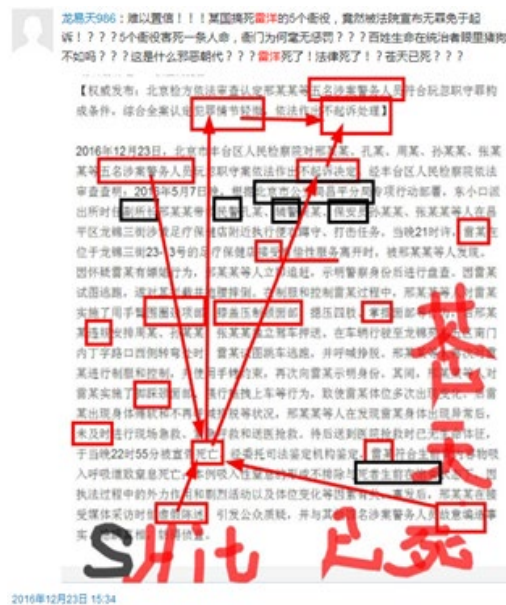


Figure 5.3 Post by Longyitian on Sina Weibo

There is another example to show online activists' acts of protest. On 23 December 2016, the Beijing municipal government (北京市政府) published a post—Lei Yang and the Police are Innocent People Before the Law (在法律面前，雷洋和警察首先都是无辜者)—through its official Sina Weibo account, Beijing Fabu (北京发布).⁶⁶ In the post, the government tried to explain and defend the procurators' decision. However, hundreds of protesters made unfavorable comments below the post to mark their disapproval. Yueguangboke (月光博客) wrote that “if Lei Yang and the police are innocent people, who are the main culprits? At present, the basic principle of society is that the punishment is to be a life for a life. If the police do not need to bear any responsibility for the killing of an innocent civilian, in the future one civilian killing a police officer will become a

⁶⁵ Longyitian (@龙易天), "Sina Weibo Post," 2016, collected by the author, on 5 June 2018, from FreeWeibo.

⁶⁶ Beijing Fabu (@北京发布), "在法律面前，雷洋和警察首先都是无辜者 [Lei Yang and the Police Are Innocent People before the Law]," 2016, collected by the author, on 31 December 2016, from Sina Weibo.

people's hero.”⁶⁷ Another Sina Weibo user, Linyuwujang (麒域无疆), said that “in the future, if you run into the police, you must get around them and be sure not to come near them. Otherwise, they may kill you. Also, they will not be prosecuted for this is a minor crime. But, if you kill one of them, you will be sentenced to death because your offense is serious.”⁶⁸

Although massive internet users were seething with rage at the Fengtai Procuratorate's final decision, the online political protests died down suddenly after 23 December 2016. Online protesters failed to compel Fengtai Procuratorate to reconsider its decision not to prosecute the five police officers. The reason why the online political protest suddenly ended is that the POS for it had been damaged. The Chinese central government did not support the Lei Yang event anymore. Chinese central media's reaction, to some extent, was a sign of the shift in the central government's position. After the Fengtai Procuratorate released its final decision, none of China's central media published news reports on the public's dissatisfaction nor hard-hitting editorials doubting whether Fengtai Procuratorate had failed to impose fitting punishment on the five police officers. The CCP's mouthpieces, such as Xinhua News Agency, the People's Daily, and China News Service, reposted the procuratorate's decision on Sina Weibo, but they turned off commenting on their posts, probably for fear of meeting with howls of disapproval and criticism. The central media outlets' unified reactions conveyed a message that they might have received the CPD's official instructions to uphold the Fengtai Procuratorate's final decision.

Why did the central government change its attitude to the online political protest? This is because the online political protest had evolved into a challenge to the authority of

⁶⁷ Yueguangboke (@月光博客), "Sina Weibo Post," 2016, collected by the author, on 25 December 2016, from Sina Weibo.

⁶⁸ Linyuwujang (@麒域无疆), "Sina Weibo Post," 2016, collected by the author, on 25 December 2016, from Sina Weibo.

China's top leadership. As indicated before, the Lei Yang case had made a tremendous social impact and attracted Chinese leaders' attention. Thus, it is more than likely that the final decision was made by the CCP's top leadership rather than the Fengtai Procuratorate. At least, before the Fengtai Procuratorate published the final decisions, it had gained the consent of top leadership. After the release of the final decision, crowds of online activists denounced Fengtai Procuratorate's handling of the police's misconduct. However, it was impossible for online activists to obtain support from central government departments to challenge the authority of China's leaders.

Consequently, internet control over the Lei Yang event became exceptionally tight. First of all, internet regulators prevented users from having access to content about the Lei Yang case. A considerable number of articles and comments relating to it became inaccessible. As a result, netizens could not see anything when searching the term, “雷洋案 (the Lei Yang case),” on Sina Weibo. Secondly, regulatory agencies attempted to intimidate online protesters by inflicting punishments on those who publicly expressed their disapproval of the prosecutors' decision. According to Radio Free Asia, Hou Xin (侯欣), a civil rights activist in China, was summoned to the police station, after making online comments to criticize the decision of prosecutors; besides, Liang Xiaojun (梁小军), who was a lawyer, was cautioned by the police after giving an interview with foreign media.⁶⁹ Additionally, Lei's university alumni were under considerable pressure from the Chinese government. Some of them were subject to police questioning and interviewing or even held in detention.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Radio Free Asia, "雷洋案 5 警被放生 维权人士评论即受警告 [Five Police Officers Involved in the Lei Yang Case Were Released and Civil Right Activists Were Warned]," 2016, accessed 26 June, 2018, <https://www.rfa.org/cantonese/news/inquire-12262016085225.html>.

⁷⁰ BBC News Chinese, "涉雷洋案警察被免诉 舆论反弹 当局紧张 [the Police Involved in the Lei Yang Case Were Exempt from Prosecution and Public Opinions Made the Authority Nervous]," 2016, accessed 15 June, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-38417215>.

Apart from stringent internet control, online protesters lose important allies. Commercial media used to be powerful allies of online protests. After the procuratorate announced the decision not to bring a criminal charge against the police officers involved, most of the commercial media stopped providing coverage of the Lei Yang case. They followed the CCP mouthpieces' example—merely reposting the procuratorate's statement. Also, lawyers and internet celebrities could hardly play a significant role owing to strict internet control. They came under tremendous pressure and faced considerable risk. Chen Youxi and his legal team terminated the attorney-client contract with Lei's family. On 29 December 2016, Chen Youxi (陈有西) published a statement, explaining that he would stop representing Lei's family because Lei's family informed him that they had decided not to pursue further legal action.⁷¹ Chen relayed the words of Lei's family, saying: "Due to our own reasons, the pressure is too great, the effort involved in the long lawsuit is more than we can bear, especially Lei's parents. Therefore, after deliberation, we drop further lawsuits."⁷²

It is not hard to understand why the CCP's top leaders did not mete out harsh punishment on the five policemen. For totalitarian or authoritarian regimes, the police are an important instrument for restricting individual freedom and ensuring citizens' obedience to authority.⁷³ China is one of the most heavily policed countries in the world. The style of China's policing is aggressive and oppressive, and its scope is surprisingly enormous, including national security, the criminal investigation, the investigation of economic crime, import and export control, border control, prison management, transport and traffic

⁷¹ "雷洋事件：家属放弃诉讼 校友抗议检方裁决 [the Lei Yang Event: Family Members Gave up Litigation And alumni Protested against Prosecutions Decision]," 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-38456530>.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Merouan Mekouar, "Police Collapse in Authoritarian Regimes: Lessons from Tunisia," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 10 (2017); Aogán Mulcahy, "Policing in Divided Societies," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences (Second Edition)*, ed. James D. Wright (Oxford: Elsevier, 2015); Liqun Cao, Lanying Huang, and Ivan Sun, "From Authoritarian Policing to Democratic Policing: A Case Study of Taiwan," *Policing and Society* 26, no. 6 (2016).

control, narcotics control, anti-terrorism, fire services, and cybersecurity.⁷⁴ Besides routine policing services, China's policing has a clear political dimension, and police activities often directly suppress political dissent and religious activities.⁷⁵ Overall, the CCP's leaders rely heavily on the police force in social management. Therefore, in terms of the Lei Yang case, despite the fact that China's top leaders cannot allow such serious misconduct to go unchecked, they did not want to inflict harsh punishment on the five policemen so as not to discourage the whole police force.

In summary, since Fengtai Procuratorate published the final investigation result, online protesters had faced a coordinated government. Although the procurators' final decision sparked widespread outrage, favorable conditions for continuing with online protest did not exist anymore. As a result, the Lei Yang event soon died down.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the rise and fall of the Lei Yang event. It finds that four key elements of the POS—elite divisions, internet control, influential aliens, and online social networks—contributed to the rise of the Lei Yang event. Firstly, there existed divisions between the central government and the Beijing police, which led to disagreements over how to deal with the Lei Yang case. The Changping police tried to cover up the five police officers' criminal wrongdoing. However, the central government was dissatisfied with the Changping police's handling. Sharp criticisms against the Changping police from the central media legitimized netizens' protest against the police, which reduced the risk for individuals to participate in the online political protest.

⁷⁴ Sonny Shiu-Hing Lo, "Introduction: Toward an Analytical Framework of Understanding the Context and Content of Policing," in *The Politics of Policing in Greater China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016), 15.

⁷⁵ "Policing in China," 43.

Secondly, capricious internet control made it possible for the event to occur. Two powerful internet regulators, the CPD and the MPS, had different attitudes towards the Lei Yang event. Consequently, in the beginning, China's internet regulatory agencies did not come to an agreement on whether to define information about Lei Yang's death as politically sensitive content or not. Under such circumstances, supervisors of Sina Weibo did not carry out strict self-censorship. Instead, they adopted elastic censoring rules to handle changing situations.

Thirdly, the Lei Yang event gained support from many lawyers, Big Vs, and commercial media outlets. Many lawyers provided protesters with legal advice on how to question the police. Some of them became legal representatives of Lei's family to speak for them in legal proceedings. Many Big Vs wielded their influence to mobilize potential protesters by spreading information and shaping public opinion. Some commercial digital media came out in support of the Lei Yang case. Their news reports helped to draw the public's attention to the death of Lei, which put the police under considerable pressure.

Finally, online social networks created favorable conditions for the rise of the online political protest. On the one hand, through social networks on Sina Weibo, information about the event continuously and swiftly flowed to almost all Sina Weibo users. The costs associated with spreading and collecting related information were neglectable. On the other hand, online social networks facilitated the formation of collective identity, which motivated potential protesters.

When it comes to the decline of the Lei Yang event, this chapter finds that the destruction of the POS made it impossible for the Lei Yang event to continue. When online activists remonstrated with the Fengtai Procuratorate's decision, they did not receive support from the central government. Moreover, internet control over the event was no longer elastic; instead, it became rigid. Influential allies withdrew from the event and lapsed into silence.

The above findings enrich the understanding of online political protests at police violent enforcement in China. First, holding online protests against violent police enforcement is difficult. The MPS is one of China's internet regulators. China's ICPs tends to be extra vigilant at online information about police misconduct for fear of suffering punishment. Moreover, the MPS may quickly order China's ICPs to delete some online content about police misconduct.

Second, elite divisions are necessary for online activists when staging protests about violent police enforcement. In China, the powers of the police are sweeping and arbitrary, with the result that internet users face a high risk when participating in collective action against police brutality. Therefore, it is necessary for online activists to exploit elite divisions to obtain the central government's response, which can reduce the participating risk so that online protests can recruit more netizens. Central government authorities, such as the central media and the CPD, may denounce the police officers involved in violent law enforcement and illegal activities of local police security organs. The CPD is particularly important because its intervention may substantially lower control over online content about police misconduct.

Finally, the impact of online protest against violent police enforcement on restricting the expansion of China's police powers may be minimal. The Lei Yang event was the biggest show of online protest at police brutality over the past decade. Thousands of middle-class Chinese even participated in the protest. Additionally, online protesters in the Lei Yang event were peaceful and rational. They had a clear demand that five police officers involved in the unnatural death of Lei Yang should be severely punished. It is hard to say that the demand was unreasonable and radical. Nevertheless, this largest online political protest against police brutality failed to make the Chinese government listen and meet their demands. Also, it did not lead to large-scale street protests. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that other smaller online protests about police brutality can also

hardly succeed in fulfilling their objectives and making meaningful impacts on China's political changes.

Chapter 6: Online Anti-Corruption Protests: The Case Study of the Watch Brother Event

This chapter aims to examine one of the most important types of China's online political protests—online anti-corruption protest.¹ It focuses on the analysis of the occurrence and demise of the Watch Brother event (表哥事件) so as to deepen understanding of online political protests in China. Over the past decade, the Chinese government has mounted multiple campaigns against suspected corrupt officials from the party, government, military, and state-owned enterprises. Along with official campaigns, each year, some government officials are investigated and brought to justice as a result of ordinary citizens' online whistleblowing. Additionally, a few online whistleblowing events provoked countrywide online collective action to protest official corruption. Online anti-corruption protests, to some extent, have become a form of citizen involvement.

The Watch Brother event was the largest online anti-corruption protests in the past decade. According to an analysis report issued by the People's Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Centre (人民网舆情观察室), there were at least 4,720,717 posts on the Internet about the event by 18 December 2012.² Shortly after a photo emerged on the Internet of Yang Dacai (杨达才) grinning at the scene of a fatal bus crash, internet users across the country began to search for his possible corrupt practices and gathered on Sina Weibo to protest about political corruption and call for the Chinese government to build asset declaration systems for government officials. Chinese authorities, however, often

¹ As discussed in Chapter 1, online anti-corruption protests refer to online grassroots movements against political corruption, and grassroots anti-corruption activists are often treated as political dissidents by the Chinese government and suffer from brutal crackdown.

² Xinhua Zhu, Yufeng Pan, and Xuegang Shan, "2012 年中国互联网舆情分析报告 [China Internet Public Opinion Analysis Report (2012)]" *Cyberspace Administration of China*, 2017, accessed 17 May, 2018, http://www.cac.gov.cn/2014-08/01/c_1111902975.htm.

crack down hard on grassroots anti-corruption movements. They shut down all grassroots anti-corruption websites and arrested anti-corruption activists time and time again. Therefore, it is puzzling that such online whistleblowing activities can soon evolve into a widespread online protest against corruption. Furthermore, it is confusing that the online political protest came to an end suddenly when China's internet users expected the exposure of more corrupt officials.

The chapter sets out to identify the cause of the emergence and end of the Watch Brother event. This chapter argues that the combination of online social networks, elite divisions, internet control, and influential allies has led to the rise of the Watch Brother event. The roles of online social networks in facilitating the online anti-corruption protest were particularly noteworthy. Social networks on Sina Weibo enabled online protesters to cooperate closely with each other when searching for evidence of Yang Dacai's corrupt practices. At the same time, these social networks also speeded up the formation of collective identity. Additionally, disagreements between the central government and the local government about how to deal with the alleged corrupt official opened possibilities for the Watch Brother event. Furthermore, internet control on information about Yang's corruption was lax. Sina Weibo's supervisors did not censor information about Yang's corruption strictly, and no internet regulator attempted to cover up his corruption scandal. Finally, support from Big Vs and commercial media outlets promoted the rapid development of the online anti-corruption protest. Nonetheless, the protest failed to achieve its goals. Chinese central government succeeded in quelling the Watch Brother event by destroying its POS. The event did not make significant impacts on the reduction and elimination of political corruption in China.

This chapter has four sections. The first section provides background information about the Watch Brother event. The second section details how elite divisions, internet control, influential allies, and online social networks contributed to the rise of the online political protest. The third section identifies the cause of the decline of the event. The fourth

section summarizes major findings and discusses the potential of online anti-corruption protests to bring about changes to China's political system.

6.1 The Watch Brother Event: An Overview

The internet event of “Watch Brother” (表哥) was a large-scale online collective action to protest corruption in 2012. Watch Brother is an internet nickname for a local government official, Yang Dacai. The event started with Yang's improper behavior—he smiled at the scene of a terrible traffic accident. At 2:00 am on 26 August 2012, a coach carrying thirty-seven passengers and two drivers was involved in a deadly collision with a tanker truck on a highway in Yan'an City (延安), Shaanxi Province (陕西省). Thirty-six people were killed in this serious traffic accident. Horrific images of the burnt and damaged coach and tank truck, issued by Xinhua News Agency (新华社) at 10:00 am on 26 August 2012, gave the public tremendous shock. However, one picture captured a Chinese official smiling at the scene of the fatal road accident. The official's name was Yang Dacai. His smiling face was wholly inappropriate on such a distressing occasion, which infuriated China's netizens.

At 4:00 pm on 26 August, one internet user, named Jadecong, copied and posted the photo on Sina Weibo and commented that “the government official was smiling at the scene of the accident and emotionally stable. N.B. A double-decker coach crashed into the back of a tank truck on a highway in Yan'an City, and thirty-six people died.”³ Jadecong's post soon attracted thousands of Sina Weibo users' attention. Many Sina Weibo users bitterly resented the rotund official's grinning. Some of them immediately used Human Flesh Search (HFS)⁴ to dig out Yang's personal information. At 7:00 pm, one Sina Weibo user,

³ Jadecong (@Jadecong), "Sina Weibo Post," 2012, collected by the author, on 15 May 2018 from FreeWeibo.

⁴ As discussed in chapter 3, HFS is a particular type of crowd-sourced detective work and aims at identifying and exposing individuals to make them get fired, suffer public humiliation, or even be subject to legal penalties.

baixingdayutian (百姓大于天), pointed out that Yang Dacai was the director of the Shaanxi Provincial Administration Bureau for Work Safety (陕西省安全生产监督管理局)⁵ At 11:57 pm, Bohailuntanganbo (渤海论坛官博)⁶ posted a set of photos which captured five watches worn by Yang on different occasions and wrote that they were “the hobbies of the director of Shaanxi Province Administration of Work Safety, Yang Dacai.”⁷ At 6:12 pm on 27 August, one day after the bus accident, Sun Duofei (孙多菲), the then Chief operating officer of a website trading Luxury goods, published a post on Sina Weibo, claiming that,

I have consulted with several watch experts. The watch in the first picture is the Rolex Oyster Perpetual model, about 65,000 Yuan (about 9,500 USD); the second watch is an Omega watch, varying from 35,000 to 40,000 Yuan; the third is a Vacheron Constantin 18k Rose Gold watch, varying from 200,000 to 400,000 Yuan; the fourth is an Omega watch, varying from 30,000 to 40,000 Yuan; the last one is a Rado Ceramica watch, about 30,000 Yuan.⁸

Since then, Yang’s expensive watches became the focus of attention from online activists. Many of them believed that as a public servant, Yang was not able to afford so many luxury watches and speculated that he might have been involved in bribery and corruption. For example, a Sina Weibo user, Zhu Yihui (朱一卉) wrote that “Oh my God. How can

⁵ Wenchang Hou, "27 天：“微笑表哥”落马舆情还原 [27 Days: Uncovering the Public Opinion of Smiling Brother]," *The Procuratorial Daily*, 2012, accessed 16 December, 2017, http://newspaper.jcrb.com/html/2012-09/25/content_110203.htm.

⁶ Bohailuntanganbo is the official Sina Weibo account of a company, named Tianjin Huayingyiruietchnology Development Co., Ltd. (天津华赢亿瑞科技发展有限公司).

⁷ Bohaibbs (@渤海论坛官博), "Sina Weibo Post," 2012, accessed 15 May, 2018, https://www.weibo.com/2610344707/yz0g55rOE?from=page_1006062610344707_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1530751251810.

⁸ Sun Duofei (@孙多菲), "Sina Weibo Post," 2012, accessed 16 May, 2018, https://www.weibo.com/1660370462/yz7qscx21?from=page_1005051660370462_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1530754026354.

our official be so rich?"⁹ Another Sina Weibo user, manlianshenhua (曼联申花) said that "Sina Weibo is so powerful. Another corrupt official will be disclosed."¹⁰

Faced with growing online protests, on 29 August 2012, Yang Dacai decided to have a live chat with netizens on Sina Weibo to respond to their criticisms and allegations of corruption.¹¹ The live chat scheduled at 5:30 pm did not start until 9:00 pm. During the live chat, internet users put thousands of questions to Yang, which mainly focused on why he smiled at the scene of the accident and how he could afford so many luxury timepieces.¹²

From 9.00 pm to 9.30 pm, Yang answered 12 out of about 6,000 questions and apologized many times to the victims' family members. With regard to the issue of his smiling face, Yang explained that:

When we arrived at the scene of the traffic accident, the horrific scene made our mood very painful. An oppressive atmosphere prevailed at the scene. When reporting their works to me, some junior officials were particularly nervous. Since some of them had a strong accent, I cannot understand some of what they were saying. While helping get them less nervous, my features looked a little relaxed. When thinking about it now, I also feel very guilty.¹³

⁹ Zhuyihui(@ 朱 一 卉), "Sina Weibo Post," 2012, accessed 12 May, 2018, https://www.weibo.com/1660370462/yz7qscx21?from=page_1005051660370462_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1530773391565.

¹⁰ Manlianshenhua(@ 曼 联 申 花), "Sina Weibo Post," 2012, accessed 12 May, 2018, https://www.weibo.com/1660370462/yz7qscx21?from=page_1005051660370462_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1530774492860.

¹¹ Sina Shaanxi, "杨达才回应网友质疑 [Ya Dacai Has a Live Chat with Netizens to Respond to Their Criticisms]," 2012, accessed 15 December, 2017, <http://sx.sina.com.cn/news/216/2012/0829/184.html>.

¹² Xiaokang Jiang, "陕西安监局长回应“名表门”：最贵一块 3.5 万 [the Director of Shaanxi Provincial Administration Bureau for Work Safety Responded to the Luxury Watch Scandal: The Most Expensive One Is 35 Thousand Yuan]," *Tencent News*, 2012, accessed 15 December, 2017, <https://news.qq.com/a/20120829/002106.htm>.

¹³ Ibid.

Concerning luxury watches, Yang replied that:

Over the past ten years, I have used my own legal income to purchase five watches at different periods. Among them, the most expensive one is a Montblanc watch (35000 Yuan), not a Vacheron Constantin watch. The other four watches are consistent with what the netizens mentioned, and the price of each one is roughly 10000 to 20000 Yuan. I have already reported the purchases to the discipline inspection authorities.¹⁴

According to an analysis report made by People's Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Center, Yang's reaction received a certain amount of praise from some internet users. For example, Fang Lanjing (方澜静), a Sina Weibo, commended Yang for his positive attitude, stating that "Yang Dacai dared to interact directly with internet users in the face of surging challenges. He deserved praise for his effort."¹⁵ It seemed that Yang succeeded in weathering the crisis.

Nonetheless, Yang's responses did not reassure internet whistleblowers. They did not stop digging into his possible corruption and consecutively posted new photos which suggested that Yang had as many as five or six extra watches outside those he had acknowledged. On 29 August night, Sina Weibo user, zhutounuofusiji (猪头懦夫司机), posted four photos and wrote that "it is Mr. Yang's sixth watch."¹⁶ On 30 August, Huazong diu le jingubang (花总丢了金箍棒, hereafter Huazong), a well-known watch expert, successively released photos of the other five watches of Yang and estimated them

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ People's Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Center, "今日舆情解读: "微笑局长"善待质疑获肯定 [the Interpretation of Today's Public Opinion: The Smiling Directors Kind Reaction Received Praise]," 2012, accessed 15 December, 2017, <http://news.163.com/12/0830/17/8A619EFJ00014JB6.html>.

¹⁶ Zhutounuofusiji (@猪头懦夫司机), "Sina Weibo Post," 2012, accessed 15 December, 2017, http://newspaper.jcrb.com/html/2012-09/25/content_110203.htm.

at 200,000 Yuan.¹⁷ New finds of Yang's expensive watches not only rendered his previous efforts abortive but also made him fall into an integrity and ethics crisis. It is fair to say that Yang's deliberate deceit aggravated the situation.

On 31 August 2012, according to the People's Daily's report, the Shaanxi Province Discipline Inspection Committee (陕西省纪律检察委员会, Shaanxi DIC) declared that "we have been highly concerned about the event since Mr. Yang's scandal erupted. We have launched an investigation into the scandal. If Mr. Yang does violate the discipline or take bribes, we will punish him seriously in accordance with relevant laws and regulations."¹⁸

On 1 September 2012, Liu Yanfeng (刘艳峰), who was an undergraduate at China Three Gorges University (三峡大学), submitted a request to the Shaanxi provincial finance department (陕西省财政厅, Shaanxi FD) to ask for information about Yang's annual salary in 2011. While Liu's request was reasonable because the right to monitor government activities is a basic entitlement for citizens,¹⁹ on 21 September 2012, through the post made by the People's Daily's official Sina Weibo account, Sina Weibo users found out that the Shaanxi FD had rejected Liu's request, saying that:

According to regulations of the People's Republic of China on Open Government Information (中华人民共和国政府信息公开条例), details about Yang Dacai's

¹⁷ Hou, "27 天：“微笑表哥”落马舆情还原 [27 Days: Uncovering the Public Opinion of Smiling Brother]".

¹⁸ The Peoples Daily Online, "陕西省纪委对“名表门”展开调查 [Shaanxi Province Discipline Inspection Committee Have Launched an Investigation into the Luxury Watch Scandal]," 2012, accessed 15 December, 2017, <http://society.people.com.cn/n/2012/0831/c86800-18883087.html>.

¹⁹ National Peoples Congress, "Constitution of the Peoples Republic of China," (Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 1982).

salary income that you had requested for does not belong to information that the Shaanxi provincial FD need to disclose publicly.²⁰

Online protesters were disappointed with the Shaanxi FD's response. Despite the fact that one day later, the People's Daily announced on its official Sina Weibo account that Shanxi DIC had decided to dismiss Yang Dacai from his post for his serious violation against the CCP discipline, online activists did not accept the situation and demanded that the government establish an asset declaration system for officials. To express their discontent, many online activists voluntarily started to track down more bribing-taking officials and shared their findings on Sina Weibo. Section 6.3 presents examples of newly alleged corrupt officials after 21 September 2012.

Online whistleblowers' findings were supposed to become valuable clues in the disciplinary watchdog's hunt for corrupt officials. However, the only response from discipline inspection authorities was a deafening silence. Also, China's central media did not give any report on newly alleged corrupt officials. More importantly, internet regulators took swift action to crack down on the online political protest. They filtered out these findings and the resulting criticisms and suspended some whistleblowers' accounts on Sina Weibo. As a result, the online protest against official corruption died down rapidly.

In brief, the photo that captured Yang Dacai cracking a smile at the site of a terrible accident caused the nameless government official to become the notorious Watch Brother and triggered an online political protest. There were two important features of the Watch Brother event. On the one hand, HFS was widely used by online protesters to collect evidence about Yang's corrupt conduct. Outraged by Yang's ruthlessness, online activists

²⁰ Peoples Daily (@ 人民日报), "Sina Weibo Post," 2012, accessed 15 December, 2017, https://www.weibo.com/2803301701/yCKB1cApo?from=page_1002062803301701_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1533093928548.

voluntarily use HFS to expose his high-end accessories, which Yang could not afford with legal income. Online protesters' findings about Yang's corruption succeeded in attracting public attention. On the other hand, the event clearly showed the emergence of civil awareness. Online activists reached a consensus that they had the right to know and to supervise the government. To gain more rights of monitoring government activities, many online protesters demanded that the Chinese government establish the asset declaration system of government officials. However, when more and more internet users engaged in the online political protest, the Chinese government swung into action against online protesters. Why did the smiling face of Yang Dacai generate a national online political protest? Why did the online political protest cease suddenly? The following sections will answer these questions by examining the rise and decline of the Watch Brother event.

6.2 The Rise of the Watch Brother Event

Elite divisions, influential allies, internet control, and online social networks contributed to the occurrence of the Watch Brother event. Compared with the Lei Yang event as examined in the previous chapter, online social networks have a more prominent role in the Watch Brother event. The following sections expound on their roles in contributing to the online political protest.

6.2.1 Online Social Networks in the Watch Brother Event

This section examines the role of online social networks in the Watch Brother event. Social networks on Sina Weibo function as an effective means of spreading and gathering information, which facilitated cooperation in the course of HFS; furthermore, these social networks stepped up the formation of collective identity.

6.2.1.1 Facilitating Cooperation in the Course of HFS

The Watch Brother event was an online collective action against political corruption. Persuasive evidence against corrupt officials is necessary for online anti-corruption protests. If online whistleblowers do not have solid evidence to support their allegations of corrupt officials, alleged officials will sue them for libel. Under such circumstances, the Chinese authorities are highly likely to term these allegations as online rumors. Internet regulators will screen these kinds of rumors and impose punishment on those who spread them. Therefore, strong evidence is the key factor in determining whether the online action of fighting corruption can continue.

There are varieties of evidence with different levels of strength, such as oral statements, documentary proofs, and physical objects. When it comes to online anti-corruption, visual content is the best form of evidence. First of all, visual information is more effective than textual information to attract public attention. Images enable internet users to read content more quickly while leaving them with a strong impression. Therefore, in the age of information explosion, presenting pictures pertaining to official corruption can provide online activists with more chances of getting public attention. More importantly, visual evidence is more persuasive than written statements. There is nothing wrong with internet users writing posts to tell a vivid story about how corrupt a government official is, but their allegation is prone to be denied. For instance, the official accused of corruption can also publish a post to claim that the story was nothing but a series of fabrications. However, it is difficult for corrupt officials to repudiate images or video footage that capture their crime scene or illegal property. Visual evidence can be disastrous for those corrupt officials and can be a protection for whistleblowers against a libel suit.

During the Watch Brother event, social networks on Sina Weibo facilitated HFS, by which online protesters obtained a body of visual evidence. HFS is based on massive human collaboration, and online social networks have improved collaboration among online activists. Through social networks on Sina Weibo, online activists simultaneously shared their findings of Yang's corruption with peers. Many of these findings then became clues

in the next round of investigations. For example, as mentioned before, on 26 August 2018, Jadecong posted the photo of Yang Dacai grinning at the scene of a fatal bus crash. According to the photo, some protestors soon dug up Yang's personal information, such as his occupation and rank. Shortly afterward, using Yang's occupational information, Bohailuntanganbo (a Sina Weibo user mentioned above) found a series of photos that captured five luxury timepieces worn by Yang While working. More importantly, Sun Duofei (a Sina Weibo user mentioned above) quickly made an appraisal of these luxury watches and provided details of these watches, including brand and prices. These details were essential because not all Sina Weibo users have deep knowledge of luxury watches. Online activists joined in the detective work voluntarily. They were linked together by online social networks and did not have command centers and leaders. Such cooperation among online activists occurred several times in the HFS process. It is hard to imagine that HFS in the Watch Brother would have been so efficient without online social networks.

Many of these images became solid evidence to debunk Yang Dacai's lies and support allegations of his corruption made by online activists. For example, on 29 August 2012, in responses to netizens' doubts, Yang declared that the five watches posted online were all timepieces he had purchased with his salary. However, online activists exposed new photos showing Yang wearing as many as six watches in addition to those he had acknowledged, which implied that Yang's statement was unreliable. These new photos quickly spread through social networks on Sina Weibo. In the meantime, more netizens convinced that Yang Dacai was a corrupt official, which further encouraged online activists to search for more evidence. One week later, Chenxiweibo (晨曦微播), a Sina Weibo user, posted four photos capturing Yang Dacai wearing several different pairs of designer glasses.²¹ One of these glasses was a pair of German-made LOTOS, which is

²¹ Beijing Morning Post, "网友曝微笑局长“浑身是宝”：一副镜架疑 13.8 万元 [Netizens Say That Yang Dacais "Whole Body Is Treasure": A Pair of Glasses Is Worth 138,000 Rmb]," *ifeng*, 2012, accessed 3 September, 2018, http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/special/yananchehuo/content-3/detail_2012_09/06/17381529_0.shtml#6467378-tsina-1-47515-c61ed62311c3e83ee6c7315bfe5cdbfe.

one of the most expensive glasses brands in the world. Meanwhile, other Sina Weibo users posted several pictures showing Yang's designer belts.²²

In short, online activists voluntarily acted together to investigate Yang by using HFS. Through their joint efforts, many of Yang's luxury accessories were exposed on Sina Weibo and become strong evidence to support allegations of Yang's corruption. Not only individual users reposted these pictures but also much news media used them as news photographs when reporting Yang's scandal. These luxury watches contrasted sharply with Yang's public servant status because, in China, the average income of the public servant is a little lower than that of ordinary citizens.²³ As a result, more Sina Weibo users fumed about Yang's corruption and decided to speak out against political corruption.

6.2.1.2 The Formation of Collective Identity

As discussed in Chapter 2, collective identity can motivate people's strong desire to improve the situation of the group they identify with, and people interact with each other to reach a consensus on how to improve the group's situation. During the Watch Brother event, online social networks facilitated the construction of collective identity. Online social networks linked together millions of Sina Weibo users who concerned themselves with the car accident and official corruption. Some of them did not know how to exercise civil rights and just swore at Yang Dacai on Sina Weibo. However, many online activists actively interacted with each other and developed civil consciousness. They reached a consensus that the Chinese government should increase transparency by disclosing information regarding assets of government officials.

²² Ibid.

²³ Xinhua, "Salary of Civil Servants Below Average: Report," *Chinadaily*, 2014, accessed 6 August, 2018, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-05/01/content_17478718.htm.

Shortly after the photo capturing Yang's smiling face was disclosed on Sina Weibo, online social networks rapidly brought together isolated individuals who were deeply concerned with the traffic accident from all over the country. They were angry with Yang Dacai for his grinning at the scene of a fatal bus crash. For example, on 26 August, one Sina Weibo user, Zuojiatianyou- (作家天佑-), wrote that "this government official has lost humanity. Smelling charred bodies, he can still smile so dazzlingly. How cold-hearted he is."²⁴ This post attracted thousands of comments. Many Sina Weibo users abused Yang and put a death hex on him. One general consensus of opinion prevailing among them at the time was that Yang deserved to be sent to prison for his ruthlessness and disrespect for the dead. However, it was not a reasonable demand because his smile captured by reporter may be just a momentary facial expression. After all, he was just a government official responsible for dealing with the accident. It was impossible for him to be as sad as relatives of the deceased. Even if Yang really smiled at the scene of the fatal road accident, he was not supposed to be thrown in jail. Instead, they could demand Yang to make a formal public apology to those accident victims. As a result, this consensus was immature and soon overpowered by other consensus.

Furthermore, online social networks have connected anti-corruption activists across the country. Not long after Yang's luxury watches were identified by Sina Weibo users, some online activists began to query whether these high-end watches were purchased by his legal income and suspected that he was a corrupt official. For instance, after Sun Duofei (a Sina Weibo user who has been mentioned before) created a post to estimate how much money Yang's luxury watches were worth, more than five thousand Weibo users made comments about her post. Their main criticisms leveled at Yang centered on his expensive timepieces that seemed to be not commensurate with his annual salary. One clear consensus among them was that CCP's disciplinary watchdogs should intervene and launch an investigation into Yang Dacai.

²⁴ Zuojiatianyou- (@作家天佑-), "Sina Weibo Post," 2012, collected by the author, on 17 June 2018 from FreeWeibo.

More importantly, many online activists developed a collective consciousness that they had the responsibility for overseeing the government and the right to access information about the assets of government officials. Almost all these online activists did not have direct conflicts of interest with Yang Dacai. At least, there was no evidence that some of them are family members of victims of the bus accident or those who were asked for a bribe by Yang. It was the sense of civic responsibility that encouraged them to actively engage in the collective action of demanding the disclosure of government officials' assets. One of the main representatives was Liu Yanfeng, who put in a request that Shaanxi FD should make information about Yang's salary accessible to the public on 1 September 2012. Liu declared that:

Before deciding to make a request for Yang's salary information, I had looked up Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Open Government Information. The regulations stipulate that information that involves the vital interests of citizens, legal persons or other organizations and Information that needs to be extensively known or participated in by the general public should be disclosed publicly. Government officials' salaries are paid by citizens and have close interests with every citizen. Therefore, I think that official salary information should belong to the scope of government information disclosure.²⁵

It was courageous of him to publicly challenge a powerful government official. His act of bravery further aroused many online activists' civil consciousness. They spread the information about Liu's request and appealed to government authorities to make responses as soon as possible.

²⁵ Beijing News, "大学生申请公开“微笑局长”工资 [College Students Apply for Information About the Salary of "Smiling Director"]," *CPCnews*, 2012, accessed 15 June, 2018, <http://fanfu.people.com.cn/n/2012/0903/c64378-18899419.html>.

In summary, social networks on Sina Weibo had an important role in facilitating online activists' cooperation during the course of the HFS. As a result, online activists obtained a mass of solid evidence linking Yang Dacai to the corrupt official. In addition, these online social networks promoted the formation of a collective identity. During interactions, online activists increased the consciousness of the corruption issue. More and more online activists realized that the government should ensure greater public oversight.

6.2.2 Elite Divisions in the Watch Brother Event

Official corruption is of great concern to the CCP leadership. It is almost impossible for the Chinese central government to tolerate local government officials whose corrupt conduct has been exposed. By contrast, local government leaders may protect their officials from corruption scandals and anti-corruption investigations. Especially if some local government leaders have accepted bribes from an alleged corrupt official, they will have stronger motivation for exculpating him. Disagreements between the central and local governments over how to deal with a local government official whose corruption had been disclosed online provided changes for the Watch Brother event.

Anti-corruption is a significant means of the CCP's leadership to maintain political legitimacy. China's economic reforms, especially market liberalization after 1992, opened up more possibilities for corruption, which ran rife during the reform period.²⁶ In 1989, widespread corruption in the CCP and government organizations sparked public outrage, which is a principal reason why the Tiananmen Square protest occurred.²⁷ After the political turmoil, China's government introduced a variety of laws and regulations to curb bribery and graft. However, political corruption is far from eliminated and remains a

²⁶ Zengke He, "Corruption and Anti-Corruption in Reform China," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 33, no. 2 (2000).

²⁷ Ibid.

major social issue in China. Many scholars point out that corruption is deeply rooted in the CCP political system, and China's leaders have not intended to thoroughly overhaul China's political system to root out corruption.²⁸ Nevertheless, it does not mean that the CCP leadership allow corruption to grow unchecked. In fact, in order to prevent corruption from imperiling the Party's ruling status, the CCP leadership have periodically launched a series of anti-corruption drives to manage the scope and incidence of corruption.

Since 2012, China's leaders have realized that increasing political corruption could lead to irreversible damage to the Party's political legitimacy. In 2011, China's corruption seemed to begin undergoing a new round of growth. According to Transparency International, China's corruption rank rose from 79 in 2009 to 75 in 2011, then fell to 80 in 2012.²⁹ China's top leaders have been aware of the gravity of the situation. At the meeting marking the 90th founding anniversary of the CCP at the Great Hall of the People on 1 July 2011, Hu Jintao (胡锦涛), the then general secretary of CCP, claimed that "the Party is soberly aware of the gravity and danger of corruption that have emerged under the conditions of the Party being long in power as well as the need to combat corruption throughout the course of reform, opening up, and socialist modernization."³⁰ Moreover, he warned that:

Grave challenges and daunting tasks remain in fighting corruption. If not effectively curbed, corruption will cost the Party the trust and support of the people. The whole Party must remain vigilant against corruption, be fully aware

²⁸ Andrew Wedeman, "Anticorruption and Corruption," in *Double Paradox*, Rapid Growth and Rising Corruption in China (Cornell University Press, 2012), 142-76; David Skidmore, "Understanding Chinese President Xi's Anti-Corruption Campaign," *The Conversation*, 2017, accessed 15 June, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/understanding-chinese-president-xis-anti-corruption-campaign-86396>.

²⁹ Transparency International, "Corruption Perceptions Index 2012," 2012, accessed 15 July, 2017, <https://www.transparency.org/cpi2012/results#myAnchor1>.

³⁰ Jintao Hu, "Full Text of Hu Jintaos Speech at Cpc Anniver sary Gathering," *Beijing Review*, 2011, accessed 12 December, 2018, http://www.bjreview.com.cn/90th/2011-07/01/content_373483.htm.

that fighting corruption will be a protracted, complicated and arduous battle, and give higher priority to combating corruption and upholding integrity. The Party must demonstrate greater confidence and resolve and take more forceful measures to improve the institutions for punishing and preventing corruption and unswervingly fight corruption.³¹

On 8 November 2012, in his speech to at 18th National Congress of the CCP, Hu Jintao emphasized the necessity for fighting official corruption:

If we fail to handle this issue (corruption) well, it could prove fatal to the party, and even cause the collapse of the party and the fall of the state. We must thus make unremitting efforts to combat corruption, promote integrity and stay vigilant against degeneration [...] We must maintain a tough position in cracking down on corruption at all times, conduct thorough investigations into major corruption cases, and work hard to resolve problems of corruption that directly affect the people. All those who violate Party discipline and state laws, whoever they are and whatever power or official positions they have, must be brought to justice without mercy.³²

Since Xi Jinping (习近平) ascended to the CCP General Secretary position in November 2012, the Chinese central government has vowed to crack down official corruption and build a clean government. A series of speeches made by Xi Jinping shortly after taking office indicated that the CCP leadership perceived corruption as a grave threat to the legitimacy of the Party's ruling. When speaking as the newly elected general secretary of the CCP on 15 November 2012, Xi Jinping explicitly showed his concern about rampant corruption. "In the new situation", he stated that "our party faces many severe challenges,

³¹ Ibid.

³² Jintao Hu, "Full Text: Report of Hu Jintao to the 18th Cpc National Congress," *The Peoples Daily*, 2012, accessed 12 December, 2018, <http://en.people.cn/90785/8024777.html>.

and there are many pressing problems within the party that need to be resolved, especially problems such as corruption and bribe-taking by some party members and cadres, being out of touch with the people, placing undue emphasis on formality and bureaucracy.”³³ When presiding over the first collective study session of the 18th Central Politburo of CCP on 17 November 2012, Xi Jinping warned that:

In recent years, the long pent-up problems in some countries have led to the venting of public outrage, to social turmoil and to the fall of governments, and corruption and graft have been an important reason. A mass of facts tells us that if corruption becomes increasingly serious, it will inevitably doom the party and the state (亡党亡国). We must be vigilant. In recent years, there have been cases of grave violations of disciplinary rules and laws within the party that have been extremely malign in nature and utterly destructive politically, shocking people to the core.³⁴

More importantly, at the second plenary session of the 18th CCP Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI, 中共中央纪律检查委员会) on 22 January 2013, Xi Jinping stressed that “we must uphold the fighting of tigers and flies at the same time (老虎苍蝇一起打), resolutely investigating law-breaking cases of leading officials and earnestly resolving the unhealthy tendencies and corruption problems which happen all around people.”³⁵ Tigers refer to high-ranking officials and flies mean local public servants alike.

³³ Jinping Xi, "Full Text: Chinas New Party Chief Xi Jinpings Speech," *BBC*, 2012, accessed 12 December, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-20338586>.

³⁴ Edward Wong, "New Communist Party Chief in China Denounces Corruption," *New York Times*, 2012, accessed 12 December, 2018, <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20121120/c20corruption/dual/>.

³⁵ Tania Branigan, "Xi Jinping Vows to Fight Tigers and Flies in Anti -Corruption Drive," *The Guardian*, 2013, accessed 6 July, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/22/xi-jinping-tigers-flies-corruption>.

To combat the tiger-level and fly-level corruption, Xi mounted a high-profile anti-corruption campaign after 2012. Since then, hundreds of senior officials, along with a great number of low-ranking officials, have been investigated, accused, or convicted. Figures from the CCDI show that, during the five years from the 18th to 19th CCP National Congress, 440 officials at or above provincial or corps level have been investigated for corruption. Among them, there were 43 members and alternate members of the CCP Central Committee as well as nine members of CCDI.³⁶ Also, more than 8,900 city-level officials and over 63,000 county-level officials are punished.³⁷ In terms of quantity, the anti-corruption campaign under Xi Jinping is the greatest effort to stem graft and corruption since China's reform and opening-up. Currently, the central government still maintains a tough stance against corruption, and the campaign is still in progress.

It is fair to say that strong official rhetoric on combating corruption as well as the unprecedented anti-corruption campaign, to no small extent, manifested the Xi administration's concern about mounting corruption and efforts to restore the political legitimacy of the Party to get popular support.³⁸ Of course, some scholars argue that Xi's anti-corruption campaign also has a practical purpose—to eliminate all his rivals and crack down the factions not controlled by him.³⁹

All in all, since 2012, the CCP leadership have recognized that mounting corruption may cause irreparable damage to political legitimacy and intensified efforts to curb it. Therefore, the central government tends to have low tolerance for local government

³⁶ Xinhua, "440 Senior Officials Investigated for Corruption," *ChinaDaily*, 2017, accessed 15 December, 2018, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-10/19/content_33443526.htm.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Minxin Pei, "Can Xi Jinping's Anti-Corruption Campaign Succeed?," (SoundCloud, 2016); Robert Daly, "The Mixed Rationales and Mixed Results of Xi Jinping's Anticorruption Campaign," *The Wilson Center*, 2016, accessed 13 July, 2018, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/the-mixed-rationales-and-mixed-results-xi-jinpings-anticorruption-campaign>.

³⁹ Kerry Brown, "The Anti-Corruption Struggle in Xi Jinping's China: An Alternative Political Narrative," *Asian Affairs* 49, no. 1 (2018); Jialong Zhang, "The 'Anti-Corruption' Campaign That Wasn't," *Foreign Policy*, 2014, accessed 15 May, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/07/30/the-anti-corruption-campaign-that-wasnt/>.

officials engaged in corrupt practices. Although there is no conclusive evidence demonstrating that Xi Jinping's administration has decided to root out corruption by fundamentally reforming China's political system, it is undeniable that he is attempting to control the incidence and extent of corruption and use anti-corruption as a method to strengthen his hold on power and win popular support from Chinese people.

The alleged corrupt official, Yang Dacai, received some degree of protection from the local government for which he worked. The Shaanxi Province government did not immediately respond to Yang's corruption scandal, which was an observable attempt to harbor Yang Dacai. In other words, although the Shaanxi Province government did not issue any official statement to help Yang Dacai to explain his inappropriate smiling and luxury watches, it attempted to use delaying tactics to postpone the anti-corruption investigation of Yang Dacai. The local discipline watchdog did not release any statement about how to deal with Yang Dacai until the central media intervened in his corruption scandal. On 31 August 2012 (six days after Yang's corruption was exposed online), the People's Daily online interviewed the Shaanxi DIC. According to the report made by the People's Daily online, the Shaanxi DIC claimed that they had been paying attention to Yang's scandal and had begun to investigate Yang's suspected corrupt practices.⁴⁰ On the same day, Xinhuanet published an editorial to express criticism over Yang Dacai, saying that:

Yang Dacai, trying to prove him innocent, is much better than those officials who have just buried their heads in the sand in the face of the public's doubt. Government officials who are swept up in the vortex of doubts should face challenges and answer with humility. Yang's courage is commendable, but his

⁴⁰ The Peoples Daily Online, "陕西省纪委对“名表门”展开调查 [Shaanxi Province Discipline Inspection Committee Have Launched an Investigation into the Luxury Watch Scandal]".

response does not prove his innocence and clear up doubts. Too many cases have shown that “inattention” is often an epitaph on corrupt officials’ tombstones.⁴¹

In addition, on the night of the same day, “News 1+1”, a program of China Central Television (中央电视台, commonly abbreviated as CCTV), provided in-depth coverage of the corruption scandal. The program is one of the most influential powerful daily news commentary programs in China and has a considerable impact on public opinions. One of the program’s producers and anchor is Bai Yangsong (白岩松), who is “as renowned and influential in China as Dan Rather and Larry King in the US.”⁴² With regard to Yang Dacai’s scandal, Bai Yansong claimed that:

To be honest, when I first saw the picture that showed Yang smiling on the scene of the road accident, I did not feel sudden anger towards him. This is because there could have been some misunderstanding over him. For example, Yang had stayed at the scene for more than two hours, and his smiling just lasted for a few seconds but was captured by photographers. In this case, there must be some misunderstanding [...] However, the story suddenly changed. Images of Yang’s the sixth, seventh, and eighth watch popped up on Sina Weibo consecutively. Notice that when chatting with Sina Weibo users, he claimed that he had purchased only five luxury watches. Is he telling a lie? If yes, is he involved in corruption?⁴³

⁴¹ Xinhuanet(@ 新 华 网), "Sina Weibo Post," 2012, accessed 12 May, 2018, https://www.weibo.com/2810373291/yzFZMdu2Z?from=page_1002062810373291_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment.

⁴² Yale University, "About Bai Yansong," 2009, accessed 10 March, 2019 <https://communications.yale.edu/poynter/bai-yansong>.

⁴³ News 1+1, "局长的“微笑”! 局长的“表”? [Directors Smile! Directors Watches?]," *ifeng News*, 2012, accessed 18 June, 2018, http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/special/yananchehuo/content-3/detail_2012_09/01/17268507_0.shtml.

The People's Daily online, Xinhuanet, and CCTV are China's central media outlets, which are under the direct supervision of the Central Propaganda Department (CPD). They are the most critical official mouthpieces of the central government. Their stinging reports conveyed a message to China's internet users and local governments that Yang's corruption scandal had come to the notice of the central government. The central media's reports encouraged more netizens to engage in the online anti-corruption protest. For example, on Sina Weibo, their news reports received a great number of comments and were reposted by millions of Sina Weibo users. More significantly, the Chinese central media's critical stance on Yang's corruption made the commercial media feel confident and safe to further expose the corruption scandal. Press coverage provided by the commercial media made Yang Dacai come under mounting criticism. Section 6.2.4 examines how some commercial media became influential allies of the online political protest.

Why did the Chinese central government actively engage in Yang's corruption scandal? First of all, a mass of visual evidence provided by online activists made Yang's corruption scandal rather conspicuous in China cyberspace. The Shaanxi Province government's delay in responding to Yang's corruption was likely to cause broader discontent and spark social unrest. Therefore, the central government tried to force the local discipline watchdog to make a response. Meanwhile, the Chinese central government can gain popular support by dealing with the local official's corruption scandal. Moreover, another likely reason for the central government's intervention was that Yang Dacai's corrupt practices were disclosed in the circumstances when the Chinese top leadership just began launching a high-profile campaign targeting government officials suspected of corruption. It was a good chance for China's top leaders to show their fierce determination to fight corruption. As a result, the scandal attracted the central government's attention.

6.2.3 Lax Internet Control

Chapter 4 has shown that the Chinese central government has established overwhelming dominance in China's internet regulation. The powers over the administration of China's cyberspace rest with several central government departments. Therefore, after being exposed online, Yang Dacai's corruption scandal had fallen within the jurisdiction of internet regulators. The consequences had been largely to do with internet regulators' handling of the scandal.

At the beginning of the disclosure of Yang's corrupt practices, internet control was not repressive. Sina Weibo did not delete posts and articles about Yang's scandal, despite the fact that Chinese internet regulators require all ICPs in China to conduct self-censorship about unfavorable information about the government. This is partly because ICPs did not usually take extra care to deal with scandals of government officials at low levels.

According to Article 16 of the Civil Servant Law of the People's Republic of China, China's civil service ranking system has 11 different levels, including state-leader level, vice-state-leader level, ministerial (provincial) level, vice-ministerial (provincial) level, bureau-director level, deputy-bureau-director-level, division-head level, deputy-division-head level, section-head level, deputy-section-head level, section member.⁴⁴ Government officials at or above vice-ministerial (provincial) level, known as "zhongguan cadre (中管干部)," were appointed by the Organization Department of the Central Committee of the CCP (中共中央组织部).⁴⁵ In general, these "zhongguan cadres" are regarded to be high-ranking officials.

Despite the fact that there is no public information showing that ICPs in China only censor scandals of "zhongguan cadres," it is clear that ICPs are more cautious about how to cope

⁴⁴ The Standing Committee of the Tenth National Peoples Congress, "Civil Servant Law of the Peoples Republic of China," (Beijing: PKUlaw, 2005).

⁴⁵ Yantai Daily, "什么是中管干部? [What Is "Zhongguan Ganbu?"]," 2015, accessed 6 June, 2018, http://www.shm.com.cn/ytwb/html/2016-01/30/content_3155033.htm.

with adverse information concerning high-ranking officials. Also, high-ranking officials often have more personal resources and social influence and are more likely to privately put pressure on China's ICPs to delete negative information about them. For example, after the corruption scandal of Bo Xilai (薄熙来)⁴⁶ appeared on Sina Weibo, supervisors of Sina Weibo filtered out all related online content immediately. It was not until the Chinese government announced Bo Xilai's removal from his post as party chief in Chongqing that Sina Weibo users could publicly discuss the scandal.

Yang Dacai is a local official at bureau-director level. It is obvious that Yang does not belong to "zhongguan cadre" and is a lower-ranking official. As a result, when information about Yang's corruption spread on the Internet, Sina Weibo's supervisors did not delete such content with extra care. Instead, before receiving formal instructions, they, for commercial purposes, are more willing to make good use of this scandal to attract more internet users.

More importantly, China's internet regulators were not actively involved in Yang Dacai's scandal by ordering ICPs to filter out related online content. China's internet regulators typically keep online grassroots anti-corruption activities under close surveillance, and they tend to interfere with bribery and corruption scandals linked to government officials, for fear that these scandals may amplify public outrage and trigger social unrest. However, internet regulatory agencies seemed to shut their eyes to Yang's corruption scandal. It was the central government's mounting anti-corruption efforts that could account for the strange behavior of internet regulators. As mentioned in Section 6.2.2, China's top leaders have attempted to combat corruption since 2012. Yang Dacai's corruption was disclosed to the public on the occasion when China's leaders commenced a campaign to crack down

⁴⁶ Bo Xilai was the former Communist Party chief in Chongqing. For more information, see BBC News, "Bo Xilai Scandal: Timeline," 2013, accessed 15 November, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-17673505>.

official corruption. As a result, China's regulatory agencies did not have a motive for preventing Yang's scandal from circulating.

Furthermore, China's central media outlets, including Xinhuanet and CCTV, reported Yang's scandal soon after it was disclosed by online whistleblowers. It may be a signal that the CPD attempted to take the opportunity to mount a propaganda campaign against official corruption. Central media's coverage reassured Sina Weibo's supervisors that they did not need to practice strict self-censorship of the Watch Brother event. Therefore, on Sina Weibo, users could easily get access to those posts and articles that linked Yang's expensive watches with illegal income. For example, Bohaibbs's and Sun Duofei's posts—two important posts that first revealed Yang's luxury watches—were always accessible on Sina Weibo. The two posts elicited a strong response in the viewer and generated thousands of comments.

In short, in the beginning, supervisors of Sina Weibo did not conduct strict self-censorship to block information about Yang Dacai's corruption. Moreover, internet regulators did not interfere with the Watch Brother event. Instead, they were lenient with the event. Yang's scandal has never been treated as a politically sensitive topic. When searching “Yang Dacai” or “Watch Brother” on social media, people can gain much information about them. It is partly because Chinese leaders' anti-corruption campaign made internet control on Yang's corruption scandal less strict.

6.2.4 Influential Allies in the Watch Brother Event

During the Watch Brother event, broad support from internet celebrities and commercial media made the corruption scandal hit the headlines many times and encouraged millions of internet users to engage in the event. On the one hand, many Big Vs were allies of online protesters. These influential users have an enormous number of followers on their Sina Weibo accounts. Shortly after online activists posted photos showing Yang wearing

luxury watches on different occasions, many Big Vs came out in support of the Watch Brother event. Li Chengpeng (李承鹏) is an example. Mr. Li is a prominent writer and outspoken commentator in China. He used to challenge China's electoral system by running as an independent candidate for a deputy to the People's Congress of Wuhou District (武侯区), Chengdu (成都).⁴⁷ Having been an outspoken critic of the government for many years, Mr. Li has been praised as "one of China's most influential online voices."⁴⁸ As a celebrity on Sina Weibo, he had more than 7.4 million followers. On 30 August 2012, Mr. Li reposted 11 pictures pertaining to Yang's expensive watches and wrote that "the eleventh luxury watch of the director came out."⁴⁹ His post automatically appeared on the timelines of his followers, which implies that the information about Yang's alleged corruption circulated to more than 7.4 million Sina Weibo users at the click of a mouse.

Some of Li's followers were also Big Vs. They forwarded Li's post, which enhanced further the flow of the information. For instance, Pan Shiyi (潘石屹), a Chinese billionaire businessman, reposted Li's message and made a witty remark, "watch-dealers are beginning to get angry with you."⁵⁰ Mr. Pan is a leading entrepreneur in China's property circles. He has more than 19 million followers on Sina Weibo. Besides, Yu Jianrong (于建嵘), a prominent Chinese scholar, also reposted Li's post, who has 2.94 million fans on Sina Weibo. These internet celebrities' intervention exerted a significant

⁴⁷ Although China's constitution entitles any citizens over the age of 18 to run for local election, in practice candidates are generally nominated by the government. For more information, see David Cohen and Peter Martin, "Who Is Li Chengpeng?," *The Diplomat*, 2011, accessed 5 May, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2011/06/who-is-li-chengpeng/>.

⁴⁸ Amy Qin, "Li Chengpeng's Social Media and Blog Accounts Suspended," *The New York Times*, 2014, accessed 16 June, 2018, <https://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/07/09/li-chengpengs-social-media-and-blog-accounts-suspended/>.

⁴⁹ Li Chengpeng (@李承鹏), "Sina Weibo Post," 2012, collected by the author, on 13 May 2018 from FreeWeibo.

⁵⁰ Pan Shiyi (@潘石屹), "Sina Weibo Post," 2012, collected by the author, on 13 May 2018 from FreeWeibo.

influence on the information their followers received, the attitudes their followers took, and the decisions their followers made.

On the other hand, China's commercial media provided wide-ranging coverage of Yang Dacai's scandal. By virtue of their follow-up reports, Yang Dacai had not been out of public sight until judges meted out punishment to him for graft. Qianjiang Evening News (钱江晚报)⁵¹ was one of the commercial media outlets that published early news reports on Yang's scandal. One day after Sina Weibo users disclosed Yang's luxury watches, it released a news article—An Official Was Giggling at the Scene of a Tragic Accident and Netizens Raised Queries About Why You Laughed (车祸现场官员傻笑 网友质问你笑啥)—on Sina Weibo.⁵² This article mainly criticized Yang's smiling and only used one sentence to mention the disclosure of Yang's expensive watches, stating that "while netizens are scolding the official, a series of pictures that show the official wearing luxury watches on different occasions are revealed on the Internet."⁵³ It may be because the official attitude to Yang's misconduct was not evident that Qianjiang Evening News appeared to be very prudent when reporting his possible corrupt practices. The article of Qianjiang Evening News attracted some other commercial media's attention. For example, ifeng News (凤凰网), Tencent News (腾讯新闻), Sohu News (搜狐新闻) reposted its news article.

A watershed moment in the press coverage of Yang's scandal came when China's central media stepped in. As mentioned before, on 31 August 2012, Xinhuanet and CCTV separately expressed doubts about how Yang was able to afford so many luxury watches on his salary. Since then, commercial media started to divert attention from Yang's indifferent smile to his likely corruption.

⁵¹ Qianjiang Evening News is affiliated to Zhejiang Daily Media Holding Group Corp. Limited.

⁵² Qianjiang Evening News, "车祸现场官员傻笑 网友质问你笑啥 [a Official Was Giggling at the Scene of a Tragic Accident, and Netizens Raised Queries About Why You Laughed]," 2012, accessed 13 June, 2018, http://qjwb.zjol.com.cn/html/2012-08/28/content_1717552.htm?div=-1.

⁵³ Ibid.

First of all, some commercial media provided extensive coverage to a series of Yang's luxury accessories that were disclosed by online activists. On 1 September 2012, ifeng News, a popular online news portal in China, reposted the pictures of Yang's 11 expensive watches and wrote that the government official grinning at the scene of a horrific road crash had been accused of telling a lie about the number of his luxury watches.⁵⁴ As of 3 September 2012, it had attracted more than 31,000 internet users to make comments.⁵⁵ In addition, on 3 September 2012, Yangzi Evening News (扬子晚报) published eight photos on its official Sina Weibo account that captured bracelets worn by Yang on his left wrist and wrote that "in addition to luxury watches, Yang Dacai also like wearing bracelets. It is netizens who found these pictures of Yang's bracelets."⁵⁶ Since Yangzi Evening News had more than 14 million followers on Sina Weibo, these photos spread quickly through online social networks. Moreover, on 5 September 2012, China Economic Net (中国经济网) reposted a Sina Weibo user's images that captured Yang's four pairs of designer glasses.⁵⁷ On the same day, NetEase News (网易新闻) reposted eight pictures from netizens that displayed Yang's belts and called on people to identify their prices.⁵⁸ Many clues demonstrated by commercial media caused increasing criticism for Yang Dacai and forced the local discipline watchdog to make a response.

⁵⁴ ifeng News, "陕西车祸现场微笑官员被指未坦诚公布名表数量 [Smiling Officer at the Scene of a Car Accident in Shaanxi Was Accused of Not Making a Candid Confession Fo the Number of His Luxury Watches]," 2012, accessed 18 June, 2018, http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/special/yananchehuo/content-3/detail_2012_09/01/17268507_0.shtml.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Yangzi Evening News (@ 扬子晚报), "Sina Weibo Post," 2012, accessed 19 July, 2018, https://www.weibo.com/1653603955/yAkIFEXH4?from=page_1002061653603955_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1532240437138.

⁵⁷ China Economic Net (@ 中国经济网), "Sina Weibo Post," 2012, accessed 12 July, 2018, <http://ah.sina.com.cn/news/wltx/2012-09-06/09049723.html>.

⁵⁸ NetEase News (@ 网易新闻), "Sina Weibo Post," 2012, accessed 15 September, 2018, https://www.weibo.com/1974808274/yAAaQ96Tq?from=page_1006061974808274_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1551142285208.

Secondly, some commercial media concentrated efforts on reporting the news on how these government agencies coped with Yang's corruption scandal. As early as 31 August 2012, many commercial media outlets reported that the Shaanxi DIC decided to conduct an investigation into Yang's scandal. However, over the following days, the Shaanxi DIC did not disclose any information about the progress of the investigation. Under such circumstances, on 17 September 2012, through its official Sina Weibo, Taotiao News (头条新闻) posted photographs of Yang's eleven 11 timepieces and wrote that:

How is Yang Dacai, known as Watch Brother, going recently? Our journalist called the duty room of the Shaanxi Provincial Administration of Work Safety. When asked if the local discipline watchdog had investigated Yang Dacai and whether he was working as usual, a staff member replied that "the Director gets to work every day."⁵⁹

Besides Taotiao News, on 21 September 2012, Beijing News (新京报) published a post on Sina Weibo, saying that:

The information about the salary of "Smile Director" is not available to the public. How much of the investigation is finished? Relevant government authorities should disclose the progress of the investigation in time [...] The government authorities' silence on such issue cannot stop the public grumbling.⁶⁰

Toutiao News and Beijing News are popular commercial media in China. They have millions of followers on Sina Weibo, more than 53 million and over 25 million respectively. Their coverage made a significant number of online protesters turn their

⁵⁹ Toutiao News (@头条新闻), "Sina Weibo Post," 2012, accessed 15 August, 2018, https://www.weibo.com/1618051664/yCkSJyAHR?type=repost#_rnd1532403611088.

⁶⁰ Beijing News (@新京报), "Sina Weibo Post," 2012, accessed 12 December, 2017, https://www.weibo.com/1644114654/yCSwZmbFT?from=page_1002061644114654_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment.

attention to the local government's reaction to Yang's scandal, with the result that local government authorities came under considerable pressure. It was difficult for local government authorities to harbor Yang Dacai under the close supervision of the public.

Last but not least, much commercial media came out in favor of the action taken by Liu Yanfeng to request information on Yang Dacai's income. As mentioned earlier, on 1 September 2012, a college student, Liu Yanfeng, publicly asked the Shaanxi FD to make the information about Yang Dacai's personal income available to the public. Beijing News gave Liu an interview, in which Liu claimed that:

Since declaring that his luxury watches were purchased by his legal income, Mr. Yang Dacai should bravely disclose information about his income to break rumors surrounding him. Besides, relevant authorities should take the initiative to reveal Mr. Yang's salary, so that online rumors that bring discredit on government agencies can be quashed.⁶¹

On 3 September 2012, Beijing News published Liu's opinion on Sina Weibo. Its coverage quickly attracted much attention, and many other commercial media, like NetEase News, ifeng, and Tencent News, reposted this news. Moreover, after Liu's request was refused by the Shaanxi provincial finance department, on 29 September 2012, the Beijing News posted an article on Sina Weibo to praise Liu Yanfeng for his courage, claiming that:

Action is more useful than ten thousand curses. Liu Yanfeng, who requested for information on Yang Dacai's salary, just did what many citizens of other countries were doing at any time. In some other countries, this kind of actions cannot be

⁶¹ "Sina Weibo Post: College Student Asks Government Authority to Make Information About Yang's Salary Accessible to the Public," 2012, accessed 25 January, 2018, https://www.weibo.com/1644114654/yA8vhdQIX?from=page_1002061644114654_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1551146036485.

considered as a news event, but, in our country, it has become hot news and created a significant impact. It reflects an issue in our society.⁶²

It is arguable that Big Vs and commercial media outlets played an important role in the Watch Brother event. By using their social status and their fame, they helped the online political protest attracted a great deal of public attention and raised Chinese netizens' awareness about political corruption.

To conclude, social networks on Sina Weibo was important in facilitating online activists' cooperation in the course of HFS and the formation of collective identity. By using HFS, online activists found extensive evidence of Yang Dacai's corrupt practices. Moreover, elite divisions made it possible for online protesters to obtain the central government's support. In addition, internet regulators did not actively exercise strict internet control, which also created favorable conditions for the Watch Brother event. Finally, with the help from many Big Vs and commercial media, Yang's corruption scandals soon became one of the hottest Sina Weibo topics.

6.3 The Cause of the Decline of the Watch Brother Event

On 20 September 2012, Sina Weibo users received the news that the Shaanxi FD refused to disclose information regarding Yang's salary income. The refusal was contempt for online protesters' civil rights. China's netizens were disappointed and angered by the Shaanxi FD's decision. Despite the fact that the Shaanxi provincial government tried to appease protesters by removing Yang Dacai from his job on 21 September, online activists attempted to continue protesting to force the Chinese government to improve government

⁶² "Sina Weibo Post: An Action Is More Useful Than Ten Thousand Curses," 2012, accessed 18 December, 2017, https://www.weibo.com/1644114654/yE9qH1QGn?from=page_1002061644114654_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1551145683754.

transparency and make government officials' asset declarations available for public scrutiny.

A large number of online activists stepped forward against the local government's decision not to disclose information about Yang's salary. On Sina Weibo, they supported Liu Yanfeng to sue two local government authorities—Shaanxi provincial FD and Shaanxi Provincial Administration Bureau for Work Safety—for their acts of administrative omission. After Toutiao News's official Sina Weibo account published the post that Liu decided to make a legal claim against the two government agencies, thousands of users left messages on the post to in support of Liu. For example, a Sina Weibo user, Shanxuanlinian-Wangpeng (沙宣理念-王鹏), wrote that "I strongly support Liu. In China, there are too few people who stand up for civil rights like you. Only can the awakening of civil Consciousness make China's future bright. You are a real patriot. Good luck and take care."⁶³ Another user, feichang manyouzhe (非常漫游者) said that,

It is almost impossible for Liu to win the lawsuit, but I still support him. This is a good enlightenment education for the Chinese people to learn how to exercise their civic rights. If everyone can stand on principle and speak out against government inaction, there will be no corrupt official in China. I hope that Liu is not the last one. Please protect yourself!⁶⁴

More Significantly, many online activists attempted to reveal more corrupt officials to display their anger and the necessity of asset declaration system for government officials. After Shaanxi Province DIC decided to eject Yang from his job, it was reported that Yang's immediate superior, Li Jinzhu (李金柱), tried to protect him from further

⁶³ Shanxuanlinian-Wangpeng (@沙宣理念-王鹏), "Sina Weibo Post," 2012, accessed 16 October, 2018, https://www.weibo.com/1618051664/yE33i8mQz?type=comment#_rnd1533042246322.

⁶⁴ feichang manyouzhe (@非常漫游者), "Sina Weibo Post," 2012, accessed 15 October, 2018, https://www.weibo.com/1618051664/yE33i8mQz?type=comment#_rnd1533042246322.

investigation. Li was the then vice governor of Shaanxi Province. Since 22 September 2012, many online activists started to search for Li's likely graft and corruption by using HFS. A Sina Weibo user, Ren Weixin (任卫新) posted a photo that captured Li's watch and wrote that "the man is the vice governor, Li Jinzhu. Is there an expert to recognize his watch?"⁶⁵ Another Weibo user, Fanwei (范炜) posted 12 pictures of Li and said that "these pictures show watches worn by Li Jinzhu while he was working. I feel he cannot lose out to Yang Dacai."⁶⁶

In addition, some online protesters moved to extend the scope of the search to find out corrupt bureaucrats across the country. Over the following days, online protesters disclosed many suspected corrupt officials. Table 6.1 displays information regarding several government officials who were accused of corruption on Sina Weibo from September 2012 to April 2013. One after the other, images that showed government officials wearing luxury watches appeared on Sina Weibo. Some of them were related to officials in the upper echelon of the Chinese government. Sina Weibo users dubbed them "Watch Uncles" (表叔).

Officials	Position	Date	Whistleblower	Luxury goods
Jiang Weihua (姜伟华)	Vice Mayor of Panjin City, Liaoning province (辽宁盘锦市)	28 September 2012	Hong Kong baguanv (香港八卦女)	Glashütte Original watch
Li Dejin (李德金)	Director of Fujian provincial department of transportation (福建交通运输厅)	18 October 2012	Zhou Zhichen (周智琛)	RADO Diamond Watch and Hermes belt

⁶⁵ Ren Weixin (@任卫新), "Sina Weibo Post," 2012, accessed 10 October, 2018, collected by the author, on 10 October 2018 from FreeWeibo.

⁶⁶ Fanwei (@范炜), "Sina Weibo Post," 2012, collected by the author, on 12 October 2018 from FreeWeibo.

Xu Guang (徐光)	Party secretary of Zhoukou City, Henan province (河南周口市)	21 November 2012	Journalist-Liu Xiangping (记者刘向平)	Five luxury watches
Zhang Jianfei (张剑飞)	Mayor of Changsha City, Hunan Province (湖南长沙市)	17 December 2012	Minzhiweixin (民智维新)	Four Luxury watches
Zhang Yannong (张研农)	The president of the People's Daily	12 December 2012	Fuhuode qimingx (复活的启明星)	Rolex Datejust Watch
He Ting (何挺)	The police chief of Chongqing City (重庆市)	25 December 2012	Qiduchishui_Chuiqinbing 2 (四渡赤水_出奇兵 2)	Six luxury watches
Sun Zhengcai (孙政才)	Politburo member, Party secretary of Chongqing City (重庆市)	1 January 2013	Gu Kehuai (谷珂淮)	Ten luxury watches
Yu Zhengsheng (俞正声)	Member of the Politburo Standing Committee	9 March 2013	Lingxiqingyankans hijie (灵犀青眼看世界)	Patek Philippe watch

Table 6.1 Government Officials Accused of Corruption on Sina Weibo from September 2012 to April 2013

When people were expecting that the Watch Brother event would bring about the establishment of asset declaration system of government officials, the online anti-corruption protest abruptly came to an end due to the closure of the POS. The CCP's top leadership did not tolerate the Watch Brother event anymore and began organizing internet regulators to suppress it. The reactions from the CCP's mouthpieces indicated that the Chinese central government had decided to crack down on the online political protest. After 20 September 2012, when online activists accused more and more government officials of corruption by disclosing images showing they wore luxury

accessories, not only the central media but also other state-run media outlets did not report the online activists' efforts and findings. The fact that almost China's state-run media outlets ignored newly alleged corrupt officials implied that the Chinese authorities were making a concerted effort to repress the Watch Brother event.

Internet regulators tightened control to prevent online protesters from uncovering more corrupt officials. Under such circumstances, Sina Weibo's supervisors began to block all disadvantageous information about those newly alleged bribe-taking officials. For example, as long as online protesters posted images pertaining to Li Jinzhu's luxury timepieces on Sina Weibo, supervisors would delete them in a short time. Freeweibo recorded a large number of deleted posts that attempted to disclose Li Jinzhu's corruption. Online disadvantageous content regarding Sun Zhengcai, Yu Zhengsheng, He Ting and so forth received similar treatment.

In addition, internet regulators set out to intimidate online activists by imposing punishments on some prominent online protesters. Huazong (a Sina Weibo user mentioned above) was one of the most important online protesters in the event. He is a famous online whistleblower specializing in identifying luxury watches on Chinese officials' wrists. Out of interest, he often collects online images that capture government officials wearing luxury watches and tries to identify those watches, down to every detail, including brand, model, and market value. In the Watch Brother event, drawing on his vast knowledge of luxury timepieces, he played an important role in identifying officials' luxury watches disclosed by Weibo users. Every time online activists posted photos showing officials wearing watches on Sina Weibo they would appeal to Huazong for help. Huazong's significant influence caught the attention of internet regulators. After being given cautions several times, he was charged by the Beijing police with spreading online rumors and blackmail and was eventually detained for 24 hours.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, maybe

⁶⁷ Ben Blanchard and Maxim Duncan, "China Police Probe Online Whistleblower over Blackmail Suspicions," *Reuters*, 2013, accessed 16 July, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/net-us-china-229>

for fear of arousing public outrage again, internet regulators also blocked information about Huazong's arrest from circulating on Sina Weibo.

Strict internet control dispersed online activists' allies. After online activists tried to take whistleblowing to uncover more corrupt officials, commercial media did not provide strong support for them. Most of them did not give coverage of new allegations of official corruption. Only a few commercial media tried to report on these allegations but failed. For example, when attempting to report on an official's penchant for luxury accessories, the Metropolitan Times (都市时报)—a commercial media in China's Yunnan province—gave up its scheduled reporting due to considerable pressure on 10 October 2012.⁶⁸ The government officer whom the Metropolitan Times planned to expose was Li Dejin(李德金), who was the director of Fujian provincial department of transportation (福建省交通厅). The Metropolitan Times planned to publish news to show Li used to wear a 50,000 Yuan Rado watch and a Hermes leather belt worth 15,000 Yuan. However, all copies of the newspaper reporting Li's scandal were destroyed before publication, and thousands of posts on Sina Weibo about this news were blocked. Li Dejin was a local government official in charge of transportation in Fujian Province. He did not have the power to order a commercial media in another province to stop publishing a newspaper and the power to command Sina Weibo to filter out disadvantageous information about him. Only the internet regulators held such power. Internet regulators' interference forced commercial media to lapse into silence.

The finding of online whistleblowers should have become vital clues to the early detection of corrupt officials. However, Chinese authorities did not take advantage of this opportunity to launch a bigger anti-corruption drive. Instead, they blocked most of the

whistleblower/china-police-probe-online-whistleblower-over-blackmail-suspicious-idUSBRE98K02C20130921.

⁶⁸ Agence France-Presse, "Outrage in China over Luxury Spending Claims," *South China Morning Post*, 2012, accessed 15 May, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1057941/outrage-china-over-luxury-spending-claims>.

related images and even put some online protesters into prison. As a result, the online protest about official corruption died down.

What caused the central government to change its attitude to the Watch Brother event? Why did the central government take a sudden action to crack down hard on the online political protest? This was because neither CCP's top leadership nor officials at other levels had a genuine desire to bring in legislation to require government officials to declare their assets. It seems reasonable for the CCP leadership to accept asset declaration systems, but this did not occur. As discussed before, official corruption can cause damage to the CCP's political legitimacy. Meanwhile, extensive research has shown that asset declarations of government officials are an effective measure to curb political corruption.⁶⁹ According to the World Bank, more than 150 countries have established systems of asset declarations for public officials.⁷⁰ Consequently, the CCP's leadership were supposed to be active in building asset declaration systems for government officials.

However, this was not the case. As early as 1987, Wang Hanbin (王汉斌), the then secretary general of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (全国人民代表大会, NPC), put forward the suggestion of establishing asset declaration systems for government officials.⁷¹ On 30 April 1995, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee (中共中央办公厅) and the General Office of the State Council (国务院办公厅) promulgated a regulation that required public officials at the division-head level or above to report information about their income to superior organization and personnel

⁶⁹ The World Bank, "Asset Declarations: A Threat to Privacy or a Powerful Anti-Corruption Tool?," 2016, accessed 6 August, 2018, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/opinion/2016/09/26/asset-declarations-a-threat-to-privacy-or-a-powerful-anti-corruption-tool>; OECD, *Asset Declarations for Public Officials: A Tool to Prevent Corruption, Fighting Corruption in Eastern Europe and Central Asia* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2011).

⁷⁰ The World Bank, "Asset Declarations: A Threat to Privacy or a Powerful Anti-Corruption Tool?."

⁷¹ Ruiping Yao and Zuyun Liu, "Chinese Officials Property Declaration System: Current Obstacles and Breakthrough," *Social Sciences in Nanjing* 6 (2013).

departments.⁷² On 11 July 2010, the two organs published additional regulations, requiring officials at the division-head level or above to report information about their marital status, overseas travel, wages and other earnings, family properties, stocks, funds, insurance and other investment, as well as spouses' and children's criminal records.⁷³ Although the CCP has attempted to introduce tougher regulations on reporting officials' personal financial situations and property, it has not established a real financial disclosure system for its government officials. The party's internal asset declaration system is not open to the public. Due to a lack of public supervision, the system, in some ways, is merely a formality.

There are two main reasons why the CCP is not willing to build an asset declaration system for public officials. The system is likely to cause uncontrollable factors that may affect the CCP's political legitimacy. Just as Lord Acton asserted, "power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely."⁷⁴ The unchecked power can become a tool wielded by Chinese government officials to maximize illegitimate private profits. As a result, the pervasive corruption of public servants has become an acute social and political problem in China.⁷⁵ Once asset declaration systems enable the public to find that most of the officials' wealth is far beyond their expectations, the government will lose the confidence of the public in a short time. In other words, asset declaration systems are likely to confirm citizens' doubts that the majority of government officials are corrupt. This will severely aggravate the antagonism between government officials and ordinary

⁷² General Office of the CPC Central Committee and General Office of the State Council, "关于党政机关县(处)级以上领导干部收入申报的规定 [Provisions of Reporting Leading Cadres' Income at or above the County Level in the Party and Government Organs]," (Beijing, 1995).

⁷³ "关于领导干部报告个人有关事项的规定 [Provisions Regarding Reporting Relevant Personal Matters by Leading Cadres]," (Beijing 2010).

⁷⁴ Lord Acton, "Lord Acton Quote Archive," *Acton Institute*, 1987, accessed 16 July, 2019, <https://acton.org/research/lord-acton-quote-archive>.

⁷⁵ Zheng Chang, "Understanding the Corruption Networks Revealed in the Current Chinese Anti-Corruption Campaign: A Social Network Approach," *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 113 (2018); Melanie Manion, "Taking China's Anticorruption Campaign Seriously," *Economic and Political Studies* 4, no. 1 (2016).

citizens, with the result that the government will face a crisis of political legitimacy immediately. Consequently, the CCP's leaders are willing to launch anti-corruption campaigns rather than establishing the asset declaration systems for government officials.

Conversely, anti-corruption campaigns can be used as a political weapon by the CCP's top leaders. Many observers contend that the CCP top leadership often employ anti-corruption as a tool for behind-the-scenes power struggles.⁷⁶ The CCP's ruling elites often engage in corruption crackdowns to clear away their potential or real opponents. In this case, the party's internal asset declaration system is more convenient to transform anti-corruption campaigns to CCP leaders' practice of power-consolidation. As a result, the CCP does not have any incentive to introduce a real system of asset declarations for its bureaucrats.

All in all, despite the fact that Yang Dacai received due punishment for his corruption, online protesters were not satisfied with the result and were keen for the system of officials' asset declarations to be established soon. However, the elimination of disagreement between the central government and the Beijing police, the retreat of influential allies, and the rigid internet control spoiled the POS, thereby making it impossible for the Watch Brother event to continue.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the process of the Watch Brother event and analyzed the reasons for its rise and fall. This chapter finds that the POS led to the rise of the Watch Brother event. Firstly, online social networks were vitally important in the Watch Brother

⁷⁶ The Economist, "Tiger in the Net," 2014, accessed 15 May, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/china/2014/12/11/tiger-in-the-net>; Ling Li, "Politics of Anticorruption in China: Paradigm Change of the Party's Disciplinary Regime 2012–2017," *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 115 (2019); Xuecun Murong, "Xi's Selective Punishment," *The New York Times*, 2015, accessed 15 June, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/17/opinion/murong-xuecun-xis-selective-punishment.html>.

event. Countless networks of follower relations enabled online protesters to cooperate closely with each other when conducting HFS. They came up with clear evidence of Yang Dacai's corrupt practices. Moreover, online social networks facilitated the formation of collective identity. Much interaction via social networks on Sina Weibo awakened many online protesters' sense of civic responsibility. They called on the Chinese government to combat widespread political corruption by establishing an asset declaration system for government officials.

Secondly, there existed disagreements between the central government and the Shaanxi province government over how to deal with Yang Dacai's corruption scandal, which created possibilities for online protesters to obtain the central government's support. Fighting official corruption is a significant method of the CCP's leadership to maintain political legitimacy. Chinese central government's discontent with the local government's handling of Yang Dacai's corruption scandal was obvious. The central media's denunciation of Yang's alleged corruption, in some ways, meant that the legality of this online anti-corruption protest was recognized by the central government, which reduced the cost and risk that online activists need to bear.

Thirdly, internet control of Yang's scandal was not strict, which facilitated the online political protest. As Yang was not a high-ranking official, Sina Weibo's supervisors were lax in carrying out self-censorship and did not block content about his corruption scandal. Also, China's internet regulators did not demonstrate any willingness to conceal the wrongdoings of Yang. Instead, the CPD tended to hold Yang as a typical example to broadcast anti-corruption propaganda.

Finally, many Big Vs and commercial media outlets took on the role of influential allies for the Watch Brother event. Many Sina Weibo celebrities came forward to support the online anti-corruption action. They mobilized potential protesters by disseminating

information about Yang's corruption and fostering public opinion. Also, commercial media provided broad coverage of the event, which kept Yang's scandal in the public eye.

Additionally, this chapter finds that the disappearance of dissensions between the central government and the Beijing police, the retreat of influential allies, and the rigid internet control contributed to the destruction of the POS for the Watch Brother event, which brought an end to the online political protest. This was because both CCP's top leaders and their subordinate officers lacked the motivation for establishing a real asset declaration system. Sina Weibo supervisors are ordered to delete all adverse information concerning those newly alleged corrupt officials, and the police interfered in the event and detained some online activists.

The above findings give an understanding of China's online anti-corruption protests. To hold online anti-corruption protests, it is vital for online activists to come up with visual evidence of government officials' corruption. Visual evidence is more solid and persuasive. It is difficult for corrupt officials to repudiate visual evidence. More importantly, in cyberspace, visual evidence can create more chances for online activists to attract a great deal of public attention.

Additionally, the Chinese leaders' anti-corruption campaign is crucial for online anti-corruption protests. If anti-corruption activists attempt to hold an online protest under the circumstances when an anti-corruption campaign is in progress, they will have more chances to receive support from the central government. However, if online activists attempt to hold an online protest in the situation in which the central government's anti-corruption campaign is not underway, they will have limited opportunities to gain the central government's support. The fact that no anti-corruption campaign is in process implies that anti-corruption is not high on the central government's list of priorities. China's leaders do not think that the extent of corruption is so high that they need to

control it. Under such circumstances, there may be no elite division for online activists to exploit when they attempt to hold online anti-corruption protests.

Finally, online anti-corruption protests cannot make substantial impacts on the governance of corruption in China. The Watch Brother Event was the largest online anti-corruption protests over the past decade. Online protesters presented abundant evidence about government officials' corruption. Also, online protesters raised a specific demand. They appealed to the Chinese government to build asset declaration systems for government officials. Their demand, which was useful to root out China's official corruption, was nonetheless rejected by the Chinese government. Therefore, it may be also difficult for other smaller online anti-corruption protests to compel the Chinese government to make concessions.

Chapter 7: Online Environmental Protests: The Case Study of the Chai Jing Event

This chapter aims to provide insight into the emergence and development of China's online environmental protests by examining the Chai Jing event (柴静事件). Environmental pollution in China has been a matter of considerable public concern. Yu Keping, who is a noted scholar in China, argues that the growth rate of all kinds of protests induced by environmental pollution is far higher than that of China's GDP.¹ According to Yang Chaofei, the vice-chairperson of the Chinese Society for Environmental Sciences (中国环境科学学会), the number of environmental protests in China has been growing at an average annual rate of 29 percent from 1996 to 2012.² Among various environmental protests, the Chai Jing event was the largest online environmental protest over the past decade.

Hardly had Chai's documentary film been released online when it attracted hundreds of millions of viewers on Chinese social media. The documentary received high praise. Even China's newly appointed environment minister Chen Jining (陈吉宁) said that Chai's film reminded him of "Silent Spring," one of the landmark books of the twentieth century, which sparked environmental protests in the United States. The documentary aroused heated public debate on China's environmental pollution and provoked a nationwide online political protest—the Chai Jing event. It is confusing that the Chai Jing event, protesting against relevant government agencies and state-owned enterprises, could occur

¹ Meng Jiao, "俞可平：环境污染引发的群体事件增速远超 gdp 增速 [Yu Keping: The Growth Rate of All Kinds of Protests Induced by Environmental Pollution Has Far Exceeded the Growth Rate of Chinas Gdp]," *The China Internet Information Center*, 2015, accessed 2 June, 2018, http://news.china.com.cn/2015-10/13/content_36804854.htm?f=pad&a=true.

² Guangming online, "环境群体事件年均递增 29%说明什么[the Fact That Environmental Mass Events Increase by 29% Annually Indicates What]," 2012, accessed 6 June, 2019, http://view.gmw.cn/2012-10/27/content_5500758.htm.

in China, which is known for its tight grip on political dissent. Moreover, the Chai Jing event fizzled out under conditions where the public outrage did not appear to be losing momentum, which makes the event more perplexing.

The chapter aims to solve the puzzle of why the Chai Jing event occurred and to answer the question of why the event died down abruptly. The chapter argues that divisions between the central government and its local representatives in terms of reducing levels of environmental pollution, lax internet control, the presence of influential allies, and online social networks gave rise to the emergence of the Chai Jing event. Nevertheless, when the event was escalating, the disappearance of elite divisions, strict internet control, and the withdrawal of influential allies destroyed the POS for this online environmental protest, thereby leading to its sudden end.

This chapter has four sections. The first section provides some background information about the Chai Jing event. The second section focuses on analyzing the four elements of the POS to explain the rise of the online political protest. The third section explains the reason behind the decline of the event. Finally, the last section offers some conclusions and discusses the impacts of online environmental protests on China's political changes.

7.1 The Chai Jing Event: An Overview

The Chai Jing event was triggered by a TED-style documentary film about air pollution crisis in China. On February 28, 2015, the film, entitled *Under the Dome* (穹顶之下), appeared in China's cyberspace. It was a 103-minute video made by Chai Jing (柴静), who was a former television anchor of CCTV. When her unborn baby girl was diagnosed with a benign tumor in the womb, Ms. Chai decided to make the documentary film because she suspected that there might be a link between the tumor and China's toxic smog.

It took Chai more than 1 million Yuan of her own money and a year to produce *Under the Dome*. In the film, wearing a simple white blouse and jeans, she gave a presentation to a studio audience to present her findings of a year-long investigation. Chai began with her fears of the severe health risk posed by China's smog to her newborn daughter. She said that "only when the air was of good quality would I dare take my daughter outside. However, in 2014, there were 175 extremely bad air days in Beijing. It implied that I had no choice but to keep her stay indoors like a prisoner on nearly half of the days in 2014."³

Then, Chai shifted the focus to the documentary film's main theme—what is China's smog, where does China's smog come from, and what can we do about smog. As for the first question, Chai explained that:

Smog refers to PM 2.5, which are tiny particles with a diameter of 2.5 micrometers. They are able to reduce visibility and leave us in a dim world. However, we cannot see them because the smallest particles the naked eye can see is twenty times bigger than them. In other words, smog is an invisible enemy.⁴

To capture smog, she carried a PM 2.5 sampling device on 26 November 2014. After 24 hours, the device showed that the PM 2.5 concentration was 305.91 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$, which was almost five times China's air quality standard for PM 2.5. Also, Chai pointed out that her sample of smog contained 15 cancer-causing matters, such as Benzo[a]pyrene, one of the world's strongest carcinogens. In the film, Chai provided the audience with an animation and an example of a lung cancer surgery to help them understand how PM 2.5 and its gang of toxins passed through each layer of our bodies' defense and caused various health issues. Chai warned that "over the past 30 years, the death rate of lung cancer in China has surged by 465%. Although smoking and ageing are two major factors in the statistic,

³ Jing Chai, "Under the Dome," 2015, accessed 6 June, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V5bHb3ljbc>.

⁴ Ibid.

the risk of developing lung cancer associated with particulate matter is receiving increased attention.”⁵

The second question is where China’s smog comes from. The documentary showed that over the past few years, China’s coal and oil consumption had become increasingly high and that 60 percent of PM 2.5 in China stemmed from burning these fossil fuels.⁶ As for coal, Chai claimed that Chinese coal mining companies did not make a great deal of effort to provide clean coal—less than half of China’s coal was washed to improve its quality.⁷ Moreover, she added that China’s heavy industry, such as the steel factories, power stations, and cement plants had consumed much coal, and that there was almost no control on emissions of exhaust fumes.⁸ The documentary included Chai’s interviews with Chinese environmental officials and experts about polluting enterprises. Conversations presented during interview implied that China was not short of environmental regulations, but environmental regulators were incapable of enforcing these regulations.⁹ For example, in the documentary film, an officer from the Ministry of Environmental Protection (环境保护部, MEP) told Chai:

Over 60 percent of steel firms have not completed the approval process. They ignored the environmental protection law [...] Environmental inspectors do not want to tackle them in any way. As a matter of fact, can you shut them down? Do you know how many jobs those steel factories create? They have been so important that you cannot simply shut them down.¹⁰

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

When it comes to oil, Chai demonstrated that the number of vehicles in China had increased by approximately 100 million over the past decade and most oil was burned by these vehicles. In addition, according to Chai, it was common that trucks in China were not equipped with emission control devices, which were required by related laws, but regulatory departments turned a blind eye to motor vehicles exceeding emission limits.¹¹ More significantly, Chai argued that the quality of China's oil was not high as it should be and China's state-run petrochemical companies impeded the improvement of China's national vehicle fuel quality standard.¹² In short, as portrayed in the film, many large state-owned enterprises, including steel producers, automakers, and oil giants, were identified as a source of pollution. In the meantime, China's environmental regulators failed to enforce existing environmental rules.

The third question raised was what can be done about smog. At the end of the film, Chai called on everyone to protect the environment, starting with nearby small things. She said that "even the most powerful government in the world cannot control pollution by itself. It needs to rely on ordinary people like you and me, our choices, and our determination."¹³ As introduced in the film, there were some tips on what ordinary people can do, on a day-to-day basis, to help reduce smog:

If you are going less than 5km, please take public transportation, ride a bike, or carpool. If you drive a car, do not let the engine idle longer than 30 seconds. If you see a diesel vehicle belching black exhaust, try to call 12369 to report it. If you see a restaurant releasing cooking smoke, ask them to install a filtering system, or leave them a negative review online. If you see dust blowing from uncovered piles at construction sites, if you think there might be a leak at a gas station, try calling 12369 to report them. If you burn coal at home, try to avoid low quality

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

coal as much as you can [...] With a little thought and care, the smog will start to clear.¹⁴

In brief, *Under the Dome* provided a new perspective on air pollution in China. It recounted Chai Jing's journey of searching for the root cause of dire smog that was plaguing Chinese urban areas. Chai combined her personal stories, statistical evidence, interviews, and vivid photographs to dissect political and economic reasons behind the smog, which made the film gripping and powerful. Additionally, she criticized China's self-interested state-run energy companies and condemned environmental regulators for weak enforcement.

As soon as debuting online, *Under the Dome* caused a sensation among Chinese internet users and ignited widespread public debate on Sina Weibo. Within three days of its release, the film had been viewed over 100 million times on Youku (优酷) and Tencent (腾讯), and internet users had made about 280 million posts concerning the film on Sina Weibo.¹⁵ Many netizens expressed their support towards the documentary and Chia's opinions about combating air pollution. They praised Chai for strongly raising people's awareness of environmental protection and bravely coming out against interest groups from the fossil fuel industry. Chai's film also provoked some criticism. Some internet users went on the attack, accusing Chai of smoking, driving a high-horsepower vehicle, and misusing statistical data.

Nonetheless, *Under the Dome* deepened people's understanding of China's smog and provoked online collection action to protest self-interested state-owned coal and oil enterprises, weak environmental enforcement, and impotent bureaucrats. More

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Daniel K Gardner, "China's 'Silent Spring' Moment?," *The New York Times*, 2015, accessed 20 June, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/19/opinion/why-under-the-dome-found-a-ready-audience-in-china.html?_ga=2.191014442.1661727099.1547087730-89860651.1517288722.

significantly, many online activists identified China's political institution as the fundamental cause of air pollution. Section 7.2.4 shows that, on Sina Weibo, many online activists condemned the unchecked government power, economic growth model with the expense of the environment, and corrupt public officials. However, the Chinese government made a rapid move to put an end to the online political protest.

Chai Jing's film sparked a large-scale online protest against the greed of China's energy giants and the government's poor performance in environmental protection. When online activists declared that China's political institution was at the root of air pollution and urged the CCP to accelerate political reforms, the Chinese government managed to stop the online protest. Why can the documentary succeed in triggering a widespread online political protest in China? Why did the online political protest abruptly come to an end without achieving their goals? The following sections will tackle these issues by examining the rise and decline of the Chai Jing event.

7.2 The Rise of the Chai Jing Event

This section will examine how elite divisions, influential allies, internet control, and online social networks contributed to the rise of the Chai Jing event.

7.2.1 Divided Elites in the Chai Jing Event

As discussed in Chapter 2, elite divisions imply that a country's political elites may disagree on a given political issue. In terms of the Chai Jing event, elite divisions presented themselves as follows: the CCP's top leaders realized the threat from environmental pollution and attempted to step up pollution control but local government leaders were not willing to rigidly operate environmental policies.

It is seemingly complicated to understand why the central government and its local representatives had different attitudes on the implementation of environmental policies. As explained in Chapter 3, delivering high economic growth is one source of the CCP's political legitimacy. Since China's reform and opening up, Chinese authorities have persisted in taking economic development as the central task and subordinated all other work to this aim. Therefore, the Chinese government does not pay much attention to pollution prevention. As a result, the power of China's environmental protection agency is limited, and the enforcement of environmental policies at the local level is weak. It is fair to say that China's governments at different levels have not given high priority to environmental protection. Consequently, it seems as if there were no dissension between the central and local governments on how to implement environmental policies. At first glance, this view appears to be reasonable, but it does not stand up to scrutiny.

Over the past four decades, China has made impressive economic development gains. However, many economic achievements have been at the expense of the environment. In a 2007 article, Xue Huifeng (薛惠锋), a senior official in the environmental and resource protection committee of the NPC (全国人民代表大会环境与资源保护委员会), claimed that, since the mid-1990s, two-thirds of China's economic growth has been on the base of environmental pollution and ecological damage.¹⁶ Environment crises, including water, air, and soil pollution, have become particularly pronounced in China. For example, the World Health Organization found in 2012 that China had the highest level of air pollution in the world, which resulted in over one million premature deaths in one year.¹⁷ The growing environmental pollution not only puts people at high risk of various diseases but may also lead to disastrous consequences for the country's economy.

¹⁶ Huifeng Xue, "全球视野下中国资源环境问题的形势与思考 [the Situation and Thinking of Chinas Resources and Environment Problems from a Global Perspective]," *The Web site of the National Peoples Congress (NPC) of the Peoples Republic of China*, 2007, accessed 08 December, 2018, http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/bmzz/huanjing/2007-09/21/content_1383838.htm.

¹⁷ Adam Vaughan, "China Tops Who List for Deadly Outdoor Air Pollution," *The Guardian*, 2016, accessed 11 November, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/sep/27/more-than-million-died-due-air-pollution-china-one-year>.

According to a research report published by the Chinese Academy of Environmental Planning¹⁸ on 3 August 2017, the cost of environmental pollution caused by China's economic development continues to rise, increasing from 650.77 billion Yuan in 2006 to 1579.45 billion Yuan in 2013 (i.e., roughly 3.3 percent of GDP in 2013).¹⁹ China's economic development at the cost of the environment is unsustainable.

In 2012, China's economy experienced the slowest growth since 1999.²⁰ The economic slowdown put a fresh complexion on environmental conservation in China. This was because China's leaders recognized that China's extensive growth model, characterized by serious resource waste and industrial pollution, could not allow for the rapid economic development anymore and they had to adopt a new model that supported steady growth while protecting the environment. In other words, the CCP leadership were well aware that environmental pollution had become such a problem that it posed a political challenge to the CCP's political legitimacy. On 8 November 2012, Hu Jintao delivered a keynote report during the opening ceremony of the 18th CCP National Congress. The report incorporated the notion of ecological civilization (生态文明) into China's overall plan. Hu declared:

Promoting ecological progress is a long-term task of vital importance to the people's wellbeing and China's future. Faced with increasing resource constraints, severe environmental pollution and a deteriorating ecosystem, we must raise our ecological awareness of the need to respect, accommodate to and protect nature.

We must give high priority to making ecological progress and incorporate it into

¹⁸ CAEP is a public institution directly under Ministry of Environmental Protection of the People's Republic of China. For more information, see http://www.caep.org.cn/ywlm/home/aboutcaep/introduction/201809/t20180913_600751.shtml

¹⁹ Yicai.com, "2013 年环境退化成本和生态破坏损失合计超 2 万亿 [Total Environmental Degradation Costs and Ecological Damage Losses in 2013 Exceeded 2 Trillion]," 2017, accessed 2 February, 2019, <https://www.yicai.com/news/5325051.html>.

²⁰ Kevin Yao and Aileen Wang, "Chinas Economy Posts Slowest Growth since 1999," *Reuters*, 2013, accessed 5 June, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-economy-gdp/chinas-economy-posts-slowest-growth-since-1999-idUSBRE90H03020130118>.

all aspects and the whole process of advancing economic, political, cultural, and social progress, work hard to build a beautiful country, and achieve lasting and sustainable development of the Chinese nation.²¹

After 2012, Xi Jinping's administration vowed to speed up the construction of a system of ecological civilization by intensifying efforts to resolving environmental problems. On 7 September 2013, when delivering the speech at Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev University, Xi Jinping stressed:

China must take a new path of development for the realization of industrialization, urbanization, informatization, and modernization of agriculture. China clearly puts the protection of the ecological environment in a more prominent position. We need not only economic growth but also good ecological environment, and we prefer good ecological environment rather than economic growth. In fact, good ecological environment itself is a valuable wealth. We must not pursue economic development at the expense of the ecological environment. We have put forward a strategic task of the construction of ecological civilization and the building of a more beautiful China with blue sky, green space, and clean water for future generations.²²

In addition, on 12 November 2013, the "Decision of the Central Committee of CCP on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening the Reform" (中共中央关于全面深化改革若干重大问题的决定, the Decision on some major issues) was adopted

²¹ Hu, "Full Text: Report of Hu Jintao to the 18th Cpc National Congress".

²² Jinping Xi, "President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech and Proposes to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian Countries," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC*, 2013, accessed 5 April, 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpfwzysiesgitfhshzzfh_665686/t1076334.shtml.

at the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the CCP.²³ As stated in the Decision on some major issues, China needed to deepen institutional reforms to promote ecological progress.²⁴ Requirements in the Decision on some major issues included establishing complete and integrated institutions and systems of ecological civilization, implementing the strictest system of source protection, damage compensation, and accountability, improving systems of environmental management and ecological restoration, and setting rules to protect the environment.²⁵ Statements and requirements on ecological civilization in the Decision on some major issues displayed the high priority that the CCP leadership gave to the construction of ecological civilization in China.

More importantly, on 24 April 2014, the Standing Committee of the NPC (全国人民代表大会常务委员会) approved the amendments to the country's Environmental Protection Law (EPL). It was the first time the EPL had been amended since it was enacted on 26 December 1986. The new EPL stated that local officials would be subject to demotion, dismissal, or criminal prosecution if they are guilty of misconduct, such as covering up environment-related illegalities, fabricating monitoring data, and so forth.²⁶ Moreover, the new EPL granted environmental regulators great punitive power to combat mounting environmental pollution.²⁷ For example, in accordance with Article 59:

Where an enterprise, public institution or other producer or business operator is fined due to illegal discharge of pollutants, and is ordered to make correction, if

²³ China.com, "Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening the Reform," 2014, accessed 15 October, 2018, http://www.china.org.cn/china/third_plenary_session/2014-01/16/content_31212602.htm.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ The Standing Committee of the Twelfth National Peoples Congress, "中华人民共和国环境保护法 (2014 修订) [Environmental Protection Law of the Peoples Republic of China (2014 Revision)]," *PKUlaw*, 2014, accessed 15 March, 2018, <http://en.pkulaw.cn/display.aspx?cgid=223979&lib=law>.

²⁷ Jonathan Kaiman, "China Strengthens Environmental Laws," *The Guardian*, 2014, accessed 16 April, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/apr/25/china-strengthens-environmental-laws-polluting-factories>.

the said entity refuses to make correction, the administrative organ that makes the punishment decision pursuant to the law may impose the fine thereon consecutively on a daily basis according to the original amount of the fine, starting from the second day of the date of ordered correction.²⁸

The new EPL did not set an upper limit on fines levied on polluters. Previously, the cost of violating environmental regulations was often so low that firms were not willing to implement measures for preventing pollution.²⁹ In the meantime, the amended Law clarified the performance evaluation system for environmental regulators. According to Article 26:

People's governments at or above the county level shall incorporate the fulfillment of environmental protection target as an appraisal criterion into the performance evaluation system for the departments with environmental supervision responsibilities at the same level government and their responsible persons, as well as performance evaluation for the lower level governments and their responsible persons. The evaluation results shall be made public.³⁰

Except for the reason that environmental degradation was so severe that China needed to move away from the growth model with high environmental costs to an eco-friendly growth model, industrial overcapacity was another reason that compelled China's top leaders to tighten their grip on pollution. The CCP leadership attempted to cope with the issue of industrial overcapacity by means of enhancing environmental protection.

²⁸ The Standing Committee of the Twelfth National Peoples Congress, " 中华人民共和国环境保护法 (2014 修订) [Environmental Protection Law of the Peoples Republic of China (2014 Revision)]".

²⁹ Jennifer Duggan, "Chinas Polluters to Face Large Fines under Law Change," *The Guardian*, 2014, accessed 12 March, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/chinas-choice/2014/apr/25/china-environment-law-fines-for-pollution>.

³⁰ The Standing Committee of the Twelfth National Peoples Congress, " 中华人民共和国环境保护法 (2014 修订) [Environmental Protection Law of the Peoples Republic of China (2014 Revision)]".

Industrial overcapacity has been a problem in China's economic development for a long time and occurs at intervals. As early as the late 1990s, China experienced excess capacity in the textile industry.³¹ Since 2002, China's heavy industry has undergone a period of rapid expansion.³² Even during the 2008 global financial crisis, the production capacity of China's heavy industry continued to increase.³³ As a result, China has entered a new round of industrial overcapacity since 2009.³⁴ According to the report made by the European Union Chamber of Commerce in China, eight industries in China—crude steel, electrolytic aluminum, cement, chemicals, refining, flat glass, shipbuilding, as well as paper and paperboard—are confronted with the overcapacity problem.³⁵

Many experts warn that China's industrial overcapacity can bring about far-reaching damage to its economic growth.³⁶ For example, scholars of the European Union Chamber of Commerce in China claim that excess production capacity has aggravated the problem of the slowdown in China's economy.³⁷ In a similar vein, Niu Li, the head of the department of economic forecasting of the State Information Center (国家信息中心), argues that industrial overcapacity will finally produce crippling effects on the development of the economy because many enterprises in overcapacity industries often

³¹ Miaojie Yu and Yang Jin, "产能过剩的现状、前因后果与应对 [Causal Relations and Solution for Overcapacity]," *Journal of Chang'an University (Social Science Edition)* 20, no. 05 (2018).

³² Helmut K. Anheier, Robert Falkner, and Jörg Wuttke, "The Dark Side of Chinas Economic Rise," *Global Policy* 8, no. s4 (2017).

³³ Linxi Chen, Ding Ding, and Rui C. Mano, "China's Capacity Reduction Reform and Its Impact on Producer Prices " *International Monetary Fund*, 2016, accessed 6 March, 2018, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WP/Issues/2018/09/28/Chinas-Capacity-Reduction-Reform-and-Its-Impact-on-Producer-Prices-46223>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ European Chamber of Commerce in China, "Overcapacity in China: An Impediment to the Partys Reform Agenda," 2016, accessed 10 March, 2018, <https://www.eubusiness.com/regions/china/overcapacity/>.

³⁶ Mark Deweaver, "China's Excess-Capacity Nightmare," *Project Syndicate*, 2009, accessed 25 July, 2018, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-s-excess-capacity-nightmare?barrier=accesspaylog>; Shuaihua Wallace Cheng, "Overcapacity a Time Bomb for China's Economy," *South China Morning Post*, 2015, accessed 16 July, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1862024/overcapacity-time-bomb-chinas-economy>.

³⁷ European Chamber of Commerce in China, "Overcapacity in China: An Impediment to the Partys Reform Agenda".

suffer low profits or run at a loss, and they are prone to become zombie companies, which waste substantial resources.³⁸ Moreover, Yu and Jin declare that industrial overcapacity can lead to profound economic consequences, including restricting economic growth, causing deflation, increasing debt risk, triggering severe instability into the entire economy, and intensifying international trade frictions.³⁹

The Chinese central government has realized the serious dangers caused by production overcapacity. On 16 October 2013, the State Council issued “Guiding Opinions of the State Council on Resolving Serious Production Overcapacity Conflicts” (国务院关于化解产能严重过剩矛盾的指导意见, Guiding Opinions):

Now and for some time to come, the work of promoting industrial restructuring will focus on resolving the conflict of rampant overcapacity [...] The oversupply conflict in some industries of China becomes increasingly sharper, and the production capacity of traditional manufacturing industries, especially in the industries that are energy intensive or have high emissions, is universally excess. By the end of 2012, the production capacity utilization rates of the industries of steel, cement, electrolytic aluminum, flat glass and shipbuilding in China were 72 percent, 73.7 percent 71.9 percent 73.1 percent and 75 percent respectively, which were obviously lower than the international average rate. The profits of such industries as steel, electrolytic aluminum and shipbuilding significantly dropped, and enterprises generally had difficulty in operation [...] If measures fail to be taken timely to resolve such problem, the cut-throat competition for the market will inevitably be aggravated, and such problems as more extensive range of deficits of the industries, unemployment of workers of enterprises, increased non-

³⁸ Li Niu, "为什么说“去产能”是中国经济的关键所在? [Why Is “Reducing Excess Capacity” the Key to the Chinese Economy?]," *Xinhuanet*, 2016, accessed 10 July, 2018, http://opinion.china.com.cn/opinion_72_145272.html.

³⁹ Yu and Jin, "产能过剩的现状、前因后果与应对 [Causal Relations and Solution for Overcapacity]."

performing assets of banks, aggravated bottleneck in energy and resources, and environmental degradation arise, which will directly imperil the sound development of the industries, even impact the improvement of people's livelihood and the stability of the society.⁴⁰

The Guiding Opinions also indicated that efforts would be made to crake down on overcapacity by strengthening pollution control.⁴¹ It stressed that enterprises in overcapacity industries with severe pollution discharges would be suspended from production, and those that were still unable to meet the discharge standards after rectification would be shut down.⁴²

Two months later, Xi Jinping emphasized that government officials should take the overcapacity issue seriously in his speech to the 2013 Central Economic Work Conference (2013 年中央经济工作会议) on 10 December 2013, stating that “we should step up efforts in resolving the problem of overcapacity and implementing the strategy of innovation-driven development. The central government’s decisions and arrangements on tackling overcapacity should be unswervingly implemented without compromise.”⁴³ Also, Xi Jinping added that “the government should strengthen the binding targets for environmental, safety and other types of standards, reinforce law enforcement, and severely punish the misconducts causing eco-environmental damages.”⁴⁴

Both the State Council’s guiding opinions and speeches delivered by the top leaders showed that the central government felt considerable concern about rampant overcapacity

⁴⁰The state council, "国务院关于化解产能严重过剩矛盾的指导意见 [Guiding Opinions of the State Council on Resolving the Conflict of Rampant Overcapacity]," (Beijing 2013).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Jing Li, "The Central Economic Work Conference Held in Beijing," *Belt and Road Portal*, 2013, accessed 12 March, 2018, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/qwyw/hyygd/1885.htm>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

and indicated that the CCP leadership had decided to cope with excess production capacity with harsh policy measures, such as strengthening the enforcement of environmental laws. Since 2013, the Chinese central government has set out to tackle overcapacity with the help of enhancing environmental protection.

In general, the Chinese central government has decided to crack down on environmental pollution from 2012. The worsening ecological environment has caused a real bottleneck to the country's economic and social development. In order to deal with the situation, China's top leaders decided to adopt a new economic growth model, which sought to develop China's economy while protecting the environment. Xi Jinping's administration enacted the new EPL to give more powers to environmental regulators and to make local governments more accountable for environmental protection in their jurisdictions. Additionally, top leaders attempted to reduce industrial overcapacity by taking advantage of enhancing pollution control.

Nevertheless, fighting environmental pollution and cutting industrial overcapacity were challenging tasks for the central government. China's local protectionism is a formidable obstacle in the way of the central government trying to accomplish the two tasks. There are three reasons why local government leaders are reluctant to shut down or scale back enterprises in polluting and overcapacity industries within their jurisdictions.

To begin with, polluting and overcapacity industries have played a significant role in promoting GDP growth. For example, the steel industry is the most productive sector in Hebei province (河北省), which had been the number one pillar industry of its economy before 2017.⁴⁵ As economic goals, like the growth of GDP and the industrial outputs, are the main criteria for measuring local government performance and deciding local

⁴⁵ Li Zhou, "装备制造业已超越钢铁成为河北第一支柱产业 [the Equipment Manufacturing Industry Has Surpassed Steel to Become the First Pillar Industry in Hebei]," *Sina Finance*, 2017, accessed 10 March, 2018, <http://finance.sina.com.cn/roll/2017-03-07/doc-ifycaasy7875658.shtml>.

government officers' career advancement,⁴⁶ local government leaders often hope for the closure of firms in overcapacity industries outside their jurisdictions. Additionally, corporate income tax from enterprises in polluting and overcapacity industries is a main source of local governments' fiscal revenue. For example, in 2012, value added⁴⁷ of Hebei's steel industry yielded 11.6 percent of its fiscal revenue.⁴⁸ Finally, reallocating workers due to enhancing industrial pollution control is a substantial challenge for local governments. Polluting factories and overcapacity enterprises employ a significant number of people. According to the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (人力资源和社会保障部), the number of employees in the coal and steel industries is around 8.5 million in China.⁴⁹ Due to the industrial capacity reduction of the coal and steel industries, the number of people expected to be laid off is about 1.8 million.⁵⁰

It is an undeniable fact that many local government officials may also understand that economic development at the cost of the environment is not sustainable and that the health effects of environmental pollution are serious. However, developing a green economy, which depends more on high technology, green energy, and services, is not easy, and tackling environment pollution is a time-consuming task. The shutdown of mines or factories may not bring about visible and rapid improvement of the environmental quality. By contrast, the level of unemployment will rise rapidly, and the economic growth rate will decrease sharply. Therefore, motivated by self-interest, local government leaders are reluctant to phase out overcapacity and close polluting enterprises in their jurisdictions,

⁴⁶ Jing, Cui, and Li, "The Politics of Performance Measurement in China."

⁴⁷ The value added of an industry refers to the total value of goods and services produced by an industry, after deducting the cost of goods and services used in the process of production. For more information, see <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/v/valueadded.asp>

⁴⁸ Fengyuan Ren, Yi Zhang, and Nanhua li, "河北钢铁行业压减产能的阵痛 [the Pain Caused by Reducing Production Capacity in Heibeis Iron and Steel Indus try]," *Peoples Daily Online*, 2015, accessed 15 March, 2018, <http://finance.people.com.cn/n/2015/0421/c1004-26875993.html>.

⁴⁹ State council information office, "国新办举行就业和社会保障有关情况新闻发布会 [the State Council Information Office (Scio) Holds a Press Conference on Employment and Social Security]," 2016, accessed 12 March, 2018, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/xwfbh/xwfbfh/wqfbh/33978/34234/index.htm>.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

even though they are aware that the nature-friendly economic growth model is highly beneficial to the sustainable development of the country's economy. In short, the conflicts of interest over the protection of the environment between the central and local governments is salient. It seems to be impossible for the central government to succeed in reducing environmental pollution and cutting industrial overcapacity without struggling with its local representatives.

Chai Jing made and released her film when the CCP's leaders were pushing hard for fighting environmental pollution and industrial overcapacity. During the process of making *Under the Dome*, Chai had received help from many government officers. Most government officials in China tend to shun media interviews for fear that their negligence in work may be exposed or exaggerated by the media.⁵¹ It is difficult for private citizens to interview government officials, especially high-ranking officials. However, many central government officials gave interviews to Chai Jing, who had already resigned from CCTV. For instance, Xiong Yuehui (熊跃辉), the then director of the scientific standards bureau in the Ministry of Environmental Protection (环境保护部科技标准司), gave Chai an interview, in which Xiong made many revelations about weak environmental enforcement in China. Besides, interviewees also included Xie Zhenhua (谢振华), the then vice-chairperson of the National Development and Reform Commission (国家发展和改革委员会), Cao Xianghong (曹湘洪), the head of the National Oil Fuel Standard Commission (国家石油标准委员会) and former chief engineer of China Petrochemical Corporation (中国石化公司). It is unconvincing that Chai finished interviews with so many central government officials simply by virtue of her personal charisma and ability. It is probable that Chai had received support from some senior government officials when shooting the film.

⁵¹ The Survey center of Peoples Tribune, "多少官员患有"网络恐惧"症 [How Many Government Officials Are Suffering Internet Phobia?]," *Peoples Daily Online*, 2010, accessed 20 March, 2018, <http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/11540043.html>.

Shortly after being published, Chai's film enlisted the support of the Chinese central government. China's central media actively promoted Chai's film. On 28 February 2015, People's Daily Online (人民网), the official website of the People's Daily (人民日报), first released the documentary and then posted an interview with Chai. In the meantime, via its Sina Weibo official account, People's Daily Online wrote eight successive posts to promote the film. It is rare for People's Daily Online to publish posts to support an individual's criticisms against some government authorities and state-owned companies. Besides, two days later, Xinhuanet (新华网), the official website of Xinhua News Agency (新华社), published three posts on Sina Weibo consecutively, writing that:

In an inaugural news conference with Chinese reporters in Beijing, the new minister of environmental protection, Chen Jining, said that "I had already watched the documentary. This morning, I called her many times but the line was busy. Then, I sent a text message to her to express my admiration. Chai Jing's film played an important role in drawing public attention to environmental issues from the perspective of public health. I really appreciate it." In the new media era, the government and social media should make joint efforts to raise public awareness of environmental protection and to rise to environmental challenges.⁵²

The news coverage by central media outlets facilitated the dissemination of information regarding the Chai Jing event. More significantly, news coverage given by the CCP's mouthpiece, to some degree, conveyed a message to ordinary people that the Chinese central government had become resolute in tackling air pollution and could inflict harsh punishments on local governments and state-owned enterprises that did not implement environmental protection policies effectively. The central media outlets' news coverage encouraged many internet users to engage in the online political protest. More internet

⁵² Xinhuanet (@ 新华网), "Sina Weibo Post," updated 1 March 2015, 2015, accessed 4 March, 2018, https://www.weibo.com/2810373291/C6yGPxtgD?from=page_1002062810373291_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1547173661980.

users protested against local governments and self-interested state-owned coal and oil companies. Also, many commercial media outlets involved themselves in the Chai Jing event and became protesters' allies. Section 7.2.3 examines the vital role of commercial media in boosting the online political protest.

7.2.2 Lax Internet Control

Not only Sina Weibo's supervisors but also China's internet regulators did not quickly intervene to restrict netizens' acts of protest so that they could freely express their opinions on China's environmental pollution and anger at local governments. As mentioned above, *Under the Dome* revealed that China's environmental protection agencies fail to fulfill environmental enforcement and local government officials tended to turn a blind eye to polluters. Also, it condemned China's state-run energy firms for resisting improving fuel standards and ignoring the health and well-being of the Chinese people. Such information is often under strict internet censorship because it is likely to amplify people's dissatisfaction with Chinese authorities. However, website supervisors and internet regulatory agencies displayed high tolerance towards Chai's film and the resulting online criticisms of the government's inaction. It seemed as if internet control had never existed in China.

Why was the intensity of internet control so light at the beginning of the Chai Jing event? On the one hand, it was because of the endorsement of *Under the Dome* from the CCP's flagship news outlets that Sina Weibo did not conduct strict self-censorship of the event. The documentary was first published on the website of the People's Daily and posted on the Sina Weibo official account of People's Daily Online. This implied that the documentary had been officially recognized and accepted by the CPD at least. Therefore, Sina Weibo's supervisors did not need to practice self-censorship to prevent the spread of such official information. On the contrary, driven by commercial interests or genuine

desire to fight air pollution, Sina Weibo was willing to promote the dissemination of such sensitive content that could attract more users and increase its web traffic.

There was one opinion that, before the release of Chai Jing's film, China's internet regulatory agencies had been well coordinated by China's top leaders to support the film. However, this point of view seems untenable because if true, it fails to explain why many harsh criticisms leveled at Chai Jing and her film could circulate freely on China's Internet. Criticisms against Chai and her film mainly included attacks on her private life and virtue, deep distrust of data presented in her film, and suspicious regarding her motives in making the film. For example, as the Ford Foundation⁵³ was listed as a supporter in the end credits of the film, some netizens suspected that Chai Jing was likely to be supported by Western anti-China forces. They denounced that the film was part of a dirty tricks campaign conducted by Western hostile forces to compel China to sign environmental agreements that sought to impede China's industrialization. These criticisms could make Chinese leaders fail in their attempts to promote Chai's film, so it was almost impossible for the coordinated internet regulators to turn a blind eye to those criticisms. Therefore, it was more than likely that a general consensus on how to deal with Chai's film did not exist among China's internet regulatory agencies when the film first appeared online.

On the other hand, energy giants targeted by the Chai Jing event were not powerful enough to manipulate the enforcement of internet control. These state-owned enterprises were not entitled to request China's internet regulators to enforce a strict censoring rule against their unwanted information. Even if they appealed for protection from their superior authorities, this is still impossible. This is because two main superior authorities of these energy conglomerates—the National Energy Administration (国家能源局, NEA) and the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (国有资产监督管理委员会, SASAC)—were not agencies responsible for internet control. They did

⁵³ The Ford Foundation is an American private foundation. For more information, see <https://www.fordfoundation.org/about/about-ford/>

not have the power to order websites to filter out energy companies' unwanted content. More importantly, as the CCP's propaganda machine, the CPD was mounting a propaganda campaign against industrial overcapacity. Under such circumstances, it was almost impossible for the NEA and SASAC to negotiate with the CPD—one of the most powerful government agencies—over content blocking of Chai's film and the resultant criticisms.

In short, internet control on the Chai Jing event was initially maintained at a quite low level. The official endorsement of Chai's film made it possible for supervisors of Sina Weibo not to practice strict self-censorship. Additionally, China's energy giants were not powerful enough to influence censoring rules on the online political protest. Consequently, the information about the Chai Jing event could flow smoothly on the Internet.

7.2.3 Influential Allies in the Chai Jing Event

Under the Dome received much attention from Big Vs and commercial media. Many of them became powerful allies of online protesters. First and foremost, many commercial media, especially video-sharing websites, played an important role in promoting the diffusion of Chai's documentary. The relentless pursuit of profit, if not the only reason, was an important one that drove commercial media to repost *Under the Dome*. On 28 February 2018, Youku (优酷) was the first commercial media to post *Under the Dome*. Following Youku, Tencent Video (腾讯视频), LETV (乐视), Sohu TV (搜狐视频), Tudou (土豆), iQiyi (爱奇艺), and ifeng (凤凰网) posted the documentary on their websites and official Sina Weibo accounts. Under the help of these commercial media, *Under the Dome* received 100 million page views within 24 hours.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Hana Broadcasting, "柴静雾霾调查之数据之上 穹顶之下 [Data on Chai Jings under the Dome]," 2015, accessed 25 March, 2018, <http://www.h-x.in/media/18.html>.

Secondly, Chai Jing's documentary received massive support from a great number of senior media professionals, many of whom were Sina Weibo's most followed figures. As Chai Jing used to work in CCTV for a long time, many of her friends were senior media professionals. No sooner had *Under the Dome* been released on Sina Weibo than these senior media professionals involved themselves in supporting Chai Jing. They spoke in praise of the film and encouraged internet users to fight air pollution. Cui Yongyuan (崔永元), Chai's ex-colleague in CCTV, was one of the most influential proponents of the event. Cui is a prominent media personality in China and is known for his natural sense of humor and outspokenness. On Sina Weibo, he has more than 15.8 million followers. On 28 February 2015, Cui reposted Chai's film and wrote that "Chai Jing, a journalist, can always see those things that many people tend to turn a blind eye to, which makes her distinctive."⁵⁵ Also, Cui in an interview on 1 March 2015 admired Chai for casting light on the causes of China's toxic smog.⁵⁶

Another famous Big V was Han Han (韩寒), a best-selling fiction author, one of the most popular bloggers, and young film director in China. In May 2010, Time Magazine named Mr. Han as one of the most influential people in the world.⁵⁷ He has over 44.58 million fans on Sina Weibo. Shortly after *Under the Dome* was released on Sina Weibo, Mr. Han reposted the film's internet address and called on people to watch Chai's documentary.⁵⁸ Besides Cui and Han, there were many other senior media professionals who openly advocating the event, such as Wang Zhian (王志安), Liu Chun (刘春), and Shi Shusi (石述思). Most of them had considerable leverage on Sina Weibo.

⁵⁵ Cui Yongyuan (@崔永元), "Sina Weibo Post," 2014, collected by the author, on 12 October 2018 from FreeWeibo.

⁵⁶ The Paper, "崔永元谈柴静纪录片：治理雾霾还需“有关部门” [Cui Yongyuan Talks About Chai Jings Documentary: "Related Departments" Are Needed to Control Smog]," *ChinaDaily*, 2015, accessed 25 March, 2018, http://cnews.chinadaily.com.cn/2015-03/01/content_19684835.htm.

⁵⁷ Simon Elegant, "The 2010 Time 100 " *TIME*, 2010, accessed 25 March, 2018, http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1984685_1984940_1985515,00.html.

⁵⁸ Hanhan (@韩寒), "Sina Weibo Post," updated 28 February 2015, 2015, accessed 4 March, 2018, https://www.weibo.com/1191258123/C6pl75TIT?from=page_1035051191258123_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment.

Last but not least, Many famous Chinese actors publicly spoke in favor of Chai Jing and her film. For example, Huang Xiaoming (黄晓明) made a post on 28 February 2015, writing that “moved by such a mother and gratified by such a reporter. I hope that everyone can do something to preserve the planet for future generations.”⁵⁹ On the same day, Sun Yue (孙悦) via her Sina Weibo account stated:

For the sake of her daughter, Chai Jing made a one-year investigation. For the sake of my son, I made a move to Shanghai from Beijing. In the face of smog, she tried to deal with it, and I chose to escape. However, now, I think we should display our initiative. We share the same fate since we breathe the same air. We need to act by starting with ourselves first. Call 12369 if you find any issue that is harmful to the environment.⁶⁰

One day later, Fan Bingbing (范冰冰), a Chinese leading film actress, wrote on Sina Weibo:

Based on her occupational sensitivity, Chai Jing, a mother and a private citizen, attempted to discover the truth about smog on her own in order that more people can be inspired to devote attention to air pollution. This is admirable. Environmental protection matters a great deal to everyone’s health. I am not afraid of death, and just don’t want to live like this. We can live better. Why not?⁶¹

⁵⁹ Huang Xiaoming (@黄晓明), "Sina Weibo Post," 2015, accessed 25 March, 2018, https://www.weibo.com/1730077315/C6rONvWsX?from=page_1006051730077315_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment.

⁶⁰ Sun Yue (@孙悦), "Sina Weibo Post," 2015, accessed 24 March, 2018, https://www.weibo.com/1228131382/C6qz5hbHB?from=page_1004061228131382_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment.

⁶¹ Fan Bingbing (@范冰冰), "Sina Weibo Post," 2015, accessed March 4, 2018, <https://www.weibo.com/3952070245/C6zj7i1BP?type=comment>.

Many other film stars also praised Chai Jing for her courage and called on people to protect the environment, such as Yao Chen (姚晨), Xie Na (谢娜), Zhao Wei (赵薇), and Li Xiaolu (李小璐). Each movie star has an enormous number of followers on Sina Weibo. For instance, Huang Xiaoming has 59.82 million followers, Fan Bingbing 62.57 million, Yao Chen 80 million, Zhao Wei 84.43 million, and Xie Na 110.9 million. These famous actors had an essential part in mobilizing people, especially Chinese young people, to join in efforts to fight air pollution.

It is worthwhile to point out that, in China, when publicly discussing political topics in China, entertainment stars often exercise extreme caution to avoid risking their careers and business.⁶² Once making politically inappropriate remarks, an actor is likely to be criticized by China's state-run media and even be banned from television and film screens. Consequently, most entertainment stars steer clear of talking about their political stance publicly, and few of them are willing to express support or opposition to online political protests openly. In the Lei Yang event and the Yang Dacai event as examined in previous chapters, almost no entertainment star publicly commented on the police's violent enforcement and political corruption.

Why were so many Chinese entertainment stars fired with enthusiasm for the Chai Jing event? The reasons perhaps lay in the official endorsement of Chai's film and entertainment stars' commercial interests. For one thing, it was safe for entertainment celebrities to repost *Under the Dome*, because the video was first issued by the CCP's official media. They did not have to fear that China's media watchdog would condemn them for spreading illegal information. For another thing, in order to gain popularity and reputation, many entertainment stars often actively engage in promoting environmental causes. Of course, it is reasonable to believe that they were sincere in their efforts to protect the environment because no one likes to live in a place with serious environmental

⁶² Yu Zhang, "Celebrities Risk Reputations, Earnings Speaking out on Political Issues," *Global Times* 2014, accessed 2 April, 2018, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/888974.shtml>.

pollution. Therefore, it was wise for entertainment celebrities to publicly express their support for the event.

In brief, almost all Chinese video-sharing websites engaged in promoting Chai's film, which encouraged the rapid spread of the film. More significantly, many senior media professionals and film celebrities come out strongly in favor of Chai's film. Big Vs' endorsement of Chai Jing's efforts strengthened internet users' belief that Chai Jing was doing the right thing, which motivated them to engage in the online environmental protest.

7.2.4 Online Social Networks in Chai Jing Event

Social networks on Sina Weibo can conveniently and inexpensively link together online activists beyond geographical boundaries. These social networks serve as conduits for protesters to disseminate information. Moreover, these networks make it easy for protesters to communicate with each other quickly and effectively, thereby facilitating the formation of collective identity.

7.2.4.1 Facilitating the Dissemination of Information

In the Chai Jing event, the widespread distribution of *Under the Dome* can largely be credited to Sina Weibo. Most Chinese media outlets released their own coverage of the film on their Sina Weibo official accounts. Then, through follower networks on Sina Weibo, the film was mostly accessible to every Sina Weibo users. For example, according to a research report issued by Eagle-eye Media Opinion Monitoring Office (鹰眼舆情观察室), Youku's post about the documentary was reposted about 104,000 by its followers and affected 12,349,400 Sina Weibo users.⁶³ Apart from Chinese media outlets, Big Vs

⁶³ Eagle-eye Media Opinion Monitoring Office, "柴静雾霾调查 [Chai Jing Smog Survey]," *EEFUNG Software*, 2015, accessed 28 March, 2018, <https://www.eefung.com/hot-report/12f7f6ba-e76a-49ee-9de1-b62ffe741d60>.

including Chai Jing herself were also important sources of information about the film. Not long after the People's Daily released *Under the Dome* on its official website on 28 March 2015, Chai Jing published a post through her Sina Weibo official account, Chai Jing Kanjin (柴静看见):

After a year of silence, Chai Jing has returned by publishing a public service film—*Under the Dome*, in which she investigated the sources of smog at many scenes of pollution and traveled to various countries to film pollution control experience. We share the same fate since breathing the same air. We need to do something for our air. Simultaneously released by @人民网 (People's Daily Online) and @优酷 (Youku).⁶⁴

According to a research report made by Konwlesys (乐思软件), as of 6.00 pm on 3 March 2015, Chai's post had been forwarded 592,627 times by her followers and had received 105,002 comments as well as 239,548 likes.⁶⁵ In short, via online social networks, the film was circulated to an enormous number of internet users rapidly.

7.2.4.2 The Construction of Collective Identity

In the Chai Jing event, another critical role of online social networks was in speeding up the construction of collective identity. As discussed in Chapter 2, collective identity is a person's sense of belonging to a particular group, which drives people to engage in activities that may improve the situation of the collectivity and makes people feel conscience-stricken if they remain inactive. Online social networks rapidly linked isolated individuals together who were concerned about the pollution of China's

⁶⁴ ChaiJing Kanjian (@柴静看见), "Sina Weibo Post," 2015, accessed 11 November, 2017, https://www.weibo.com/3169959511/C6mqEzMiT?from=page_1005053169959511_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment.

⁶⁵ Konwlesys, "柴静雾霾调查话题舆情关注形态解析 [Analysis on the Public Opinion of Chai Jing Smog]," 2015, accessed 15 February, 2018, <http://www.konwlesys.cn/wp/article/8217>.

environment. They communicated with each other on Sina Weibo and formed different cohesive groups. In general, there were two types of collective identity.

First, online social networks linked together city dwellers afflicted by smog across the country to participate in the Chai Jing event. On Sina Weibo, they condemned state-owned monopolies and appealed to Chinese authorities to step up pollution control. Young parents were a conspicuous community in the online political protest. Considering that air pollution can seriously damage their kids' health, they actively distributed Chai's film and made comments that shared their feelings. For example, Panpanjoe (潘潘 Joe), one Beijing mother, left a comment on Chai's post:

I want to give Chai Jing the thumbs up. I have carefully watched the film, which made me depressed. I have a daughter also, just three years old. She is very sensitive to smog due to allergic rhinitis. Every time I saw her taking medicine or getting inhalation treatment, my heart hurt. I know it is very unsafe for her to live in such an environment. She is too young, and her body is still growing. The damage caused by smog to her may be irreparable. However, I am not capable of bringing her to a healthy environment by moving to another city. Now, it has become an extravagant thing for her to take a breath of fresh air.⁶⁶

Another user, Qing321123, commented below Chai's post:

I felt scared after spending nearly two hours watching *Under the Dome*. I am also a mother. Although air pollution in the city I live in is not too seriously now, I can imagine how sad I would be if I had to keep my child at home in heavily polluted days. Thank you very much, Chai Jing. I sort of want to cry now. My strength is too weak to change the environment. I hope that all people can go into action so

⁶⁶ Panpanjoe (@潘潘 Joe), "Sina Weibo Post," 2015, accessed 11 May, 2018, collected by the author from FreeWeibo.

that our children can grow up under the blue sky and white clouds and enjoy the fresh air.⁶⁷

In addition to young parents, white-collar workers living in cities bedeviled by air pollution were another important community in the online protest. Chai's film left these office workers run out of patience to bad smog. Their angry voices could be discovered easily on Sina Weibo. Take comments below Chai Jing's post for example. A Sina Weibo user in Beijing, Hutoumao (虎头猫), replied that:

Sitting in front of the computer in my office, I intently watched the documentary during lunch time. To my surprise, I am living in such a polluted Beijing. In retrospect, it seems that I have been used to enduring heavy smog. I have two air purifiers at home and put a pollution mask on when outside. *Under the Dome* makes me feel that what I have done is meaningless. In order to protect our living environment, I have to declare war on those polluting state-owned enterprises. One man's power is tiny. I hope more people can watch the film and make joint efforts to fight pollution.⁶⁸

Chen Shushu (陈树树) is a Sina Weibo user living in Handan (邯郸), one of China's most polluted cities due to heavy industrial outputs. He commented that:

I am in Handan, a city much more polluted than Beijing. Through the windows of my office, I can see stale haze now. In fact, I need to work while coughing. In past winters, smog was often so bad like this. However, I did not link smog to my bad cough until watching the documentary. I feel that my cough is closely related to

⁶⁷ Qing321123 (@Qing321123), "Sina Weibo Post," 2015, accessed 2 February, 2018, collected by the author from FreeWeibo.

⁶⁸ Hutoumao (@虎头猫), "Sina Weibo Post," 2015, accessed 11 April, 2018, https://www.weibo.com/3169959511/C6mqEzMiT?from=page_1005053169959511_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1536629241481.

toxic smog. I am the victim of those unscrupulous polluting factories. I think I must do something to push the government to clean up the smog.⁶⁹

The white-collar workers' angry voices of this sort can also be found in other places. Below Hanhan's post, a teacher, Jingxiaoguai (竞小乖) wrote that:

Thanks for Chai Jing's extremely well-done investigation, which let me know that China's state-owned energy companies are so greedy and selfish that they always put the companies' interests ahead of citizens' wellbeing. I think everyone should do something to control air pollution. I am a history teacher. What I can do is to ask my students to watch *Under the Dome* in their first lesson.⁷⁰

Most urban white-collar workers have high demands for a better quality of life and are willing to speak out about issues that harm their health.⁷¹ They have grown more concerned about air pollution, despite China having many other pressing environments problems, including water pollution, desertification, soil pollution, and deforestation.⁷² This is because air pollution not only damages health but can directly interfere with daily life. For example, thick smog can give rise to road closures and congestion as well as flight delays and cancellations. Additionally, most white-collar employees work in industries that are not directly related to air pollution, such as finance, IT, and education.

⁶⁹ Chen shushu (@ 陈树树), "Sina Weibo Post," 2015, accessed 11 April, 2018, https://www.weibo.com/3169959511/C6mqEzMiT?from=page_1005053169959511_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1536629241481.

⁷⁰ Jingxiaoguai (@ 竞小乖), "Sina Weibo Post," 2015, accessed 11 April, 2018, https://www.weibo.com/1191258123/C6pl75TIT?from=page_1035051191258123_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1536627782769.

⁷¹ Matthew Kahn, "As Incomes Rise in China, So Does Concern About Pollution," *The Conversation*, 2012, accessed 14 December, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/as-incomes-rise-in-china-so-does-concern-about-pollution-65617>.

⁷² Chen Teping, "Pollution Documentary 'under the Dome' Blankets Chinese Internet," 2015, accessed 10 December, 2017, <https://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2015/03/02/pollution-documentary-under-the-dome-blankets-chinese-internet/>.

Therefore, they do not have to worry about losing their jobs when polluting enterprises were shut down.

Generally speaking, these comments reflected that many concerns which Chai expressed in her film had struck a chord with white-collar workers living in polluted cities. Chai's documentary made these city dwellers feel that severe smog was a major obstacle for them to lead a high quality of life. Encouraged by Chai's documentary, they spoke out against China's energy giants and steel companies and wanted to do their bit for China's environmental protection, such as reporting polluting activities by calling 12369 and taking public transportation.

Although admiring Chai's courage, many online activists thought that Chai's investigation only scratched the surface of environmental problems and her suggestions for how to control air pollution were superficial. They attempted to expose the deeper causes of air pollution. For example, a Sina Weibo user, fangkongdashi (放空大师), commented:

Under the Dome came as a great shock to everyone. It has stunning visuals and detailed data but a hasty conclusion. I feel that she was evasive about the root cause of severe smog. The success of the law depends on whether it can be well enforced. I guess political corruption is the root cause of severe air pollution.⁷³

Furthermore, some online activists were more vocal in their criticism of the government. They directly ascribed severe air pollution to China's political institution. When replying to Chai's post, a user, Xujiguancha (徐记观察), wrote:

⁷³ fangkongdashi (@放空大师), "Sina Weibo Post," 2015, accessed 11 February, 2018, https://www.weibo.com/3169959511/C6mqEzMiT?from=page_1005053169959511_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1536826613388.

Intensely agree! Now, the government is attempting to ban people from lighting fireworks and producing smoked meats in the name of controlling smog. Can I ask if these activities are the chief causes of smog? Why not spend money and energy on improving petroleum refining equipment of the big two oil companies to provide cleaner energy? Why does the government permit coal bosses to make loads of money at the expense of the environment? Why are environmental regulators always so powerless in the face of those large polluting enterprises? Why are many state-owned enterprises China's main polluters?⁷⁴

Another Sina Weibo user, Haogunian_King (郝姑娘_King), wrote below Chai's post:

It is Chai Jing, a private citizen, who has conducted the investigation of smog. It is quite shaming that our government did not carry out investigations of this sort. Moreover, there are too few media figures who can give such a report on smog like her. Official corruption in China is rampant. I guess that the total population of the corrupt may be equal to the overall population of some countries. Incoherent and ill-thought-out policies, irresponsible government agencies, and poor supervision made it impossible for city dwellers live a life with blue sky and white cloud.⁷⁵

The two comments received 6,208 and 5,271 likes on Sina Weibo, respectively, which implied that many online protesters had already pointed an accusing finger at the Chinese government. To some extent, a collective consciousness among online protesters began to emerge that the irresponsible government may be the biggest cause for air pollution.

⁷⁴ Xujiguancha (@徐记观察), "Sina Weibo Post," 2015, accessed 1 December, 2017, https://www.weibo.com/3169959511/C6mqEzMiT?from=page_1005053169959511_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1536890993081.

⁷⁵ Haogunian_King (@郝姑娘_King), "Sina Weibo Post," 2015, accessed 2 December, 2017, https://www.weibo.com/3169959511/C6mqEzMiT?from=page_1005053169959511_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1536891776040.

Second, online social networks enabled workers in polluting industries and people having sympathy for them to gather online to share their worries about imminent unemployment and to demand that the Chinese government had to put forward workable solutions to help workers who may become redundant. For instance, one Sina Weibo user from the steel industry, Jianghulaoda (江湖老大), commented blew Chai Jiang's Sina Weibo account:

We all live under the same sky. I also hate pollution and hope to live under blue sky and white clouds. However, I need to work to bring up my family. Due to the documentary, people are filled with deep resentment at the steel industry. I am afraid that in order to appease public outrage, the government will crack down hard on steel companies without scruple about our livelihood. Once the government shut down steel companies, I will become jobless. For me, the scariest thing is not smog but unemployment.⁷⁶

Another Weibo user, duoduoichanshiguan (多多铲屎官), blamed Chai Jing for political propaganda:

Chai's film is sheer political propaganda. The voice of people working in polluting industries has been drowned out by public indignation about polluters provoked by the film. It seems that few people are caring about if the government has made careful arrangements for people who are unemployed due to pollution crackdown. Are there any policies to help them find work? Will they receive appropriate compensation from the government? If not, closing down polluting factories is a tyrannical act.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Jianghulaoda (@江湖老大), "Sina Weibo Post," 2015, accessed 2 December, 2017, https://www.weibo.com/3169959511/C6mqEzMiT?from=page_1005053169959511_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1536891776040.

⁷⁷ duoduoichanshiguan (@多多铲屎官), "Sina Weibo Post," 2015, accessed 2 December, 2017, <https://login.sina.com.cn/crossdomain2.php?action=login&entry=miniblog&r=https%3A%2F%2Fpassport.weibo.com%2Fwbss%2Flogin%3Fssosavestate%3D1568603416%26url%3Dhttps%253A%252F%252>

These worrying problems also drew many scholars' attention. For example, Chen Ping, a professor at Fudan University, argued:

Such a film helps enhance environmental law enforcement by promoting the formation of citizens' environmental awareness. It is an admirable effort. However, at the same time, everyone should understand that environmental protection can only be gradually improved; otherwise, it will lead to de-industrialization, which will result in serious unemployment crisis and social problems.⁷⁸

To conclude, online social networks had a crucial part in facilitating political mobilization by shaping collective identity. City dwellers who suffered from severe air pollution gathered online to speak up for Chai Jing. Further, by interacting with each other, many of them began to understand that not only polluting enterprises but also the government should take direct responsibility for the serious problem of air pollution. Moreover, employees in polluting industries and their sympathizers gave dissenting voices about the government's pollution control attempts and expressed their concerns regarding mass unemployment, which would take place in the aftermath of the film. Most of them did not oppose environmental protection because they were also victims of air pollution. However, they were worried that the government's pollution crackdown would probably render them jobless. They demanded that before shutting down polluting companies, the government had to propose practicable measures to help workers whose jobs may become redundant.

Fweibo.com%252F1249819153%252FC6JXNgEvV%253Ftype%253Dcomment%26display%3D0%26ticket%3DST-MTc4MzAzNzA1NQ%3D%3D-1537067416-gz-8D9A62CEDA24EF74EA220B66FCFE62DD-1%26retcode%3D0&login_time=1536886089&sign=dfaadeb73410ccc6.

⁷⁸ Chinadaily, "柴静雾霾纪录片引各方争议 [Chai Jings Documentary on Smog Is Highly Controversial]," 2015, accessed 10 May, 2018, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/interface/toutiao/1138561/2015-3-1/cd_19686847.html.

7.3 The Cause of the Decline of the Chai Jing Event

Four days after Chai Jing released her documentary, Wan Zhanxiang (万战翔), a high-ranking official from China National Petroleum Corporation (中国石油天然气集团公司)—one of the largest integrated energy groups in China, published an article to counter the allegations made by Chai Jing. In the article, Wan attempted to dismiss Chai's film as highly meaningless, saying that:

Perhaps Chai does not have enough brain power, or she does not have adequate knowledge. Anyway, her film does not have real insight [...] Actually, every single Chinese is a smog producer. To control, regulate, and clear up smog is the government's responsibility.⁷⁹

Although Wan declared that the article only represented his own opinion, there was speculation that he wrote on behalf of the China National Petroleum Corporation and attempted to defend China's oil and gas industries from blame for causing air pollution. The article widely circulated among Chinese media outlets and caused an immediate public outcry. Online protesters did not accept Wan's explanation and made comments on the article to express their disapproval.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, while online activists were fiercely condemning the arrogance of state-owned fuel companies, government authorities suddenly started taking action to repress the online political protest. Some

⁷⁹ Cubeoil, "中石油高层亲自撰文反击柴静雾霾纪录片," *Chinadaily*, 2015, accessed 13 March, 2018, http://cnews.chinadaily.com.cn/2015-03/03/content_19703228.htm.

⁸⁰ For example, see NetEase News Kehuoduan (@网易新闻客户端), "Sina Weibo Post," 2015, accessed 2 December, 2017, https://www.weibo.com/1974808274/C6QccwzRx?from=page_1006061974808274_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1547606011450; Fenghuangwang (@凤凰网), "Sina Weibo Post," 2015, accessed 2 December, 2017, https://www.weibo.com/2615417307/C6QDkvVag?from=page_1002062615417307_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment; Maocaijing (@猫财经), "Sina Weibo Post," 2015, accessed 2 December, 2017, https://www.weibo.com/3243067320/C6QexntuV?refer_flag=1001030103_&type=comment#_rnd1547607796818.

online activists strived to keep protesting and escalate the protest by taking to the streets, but Chinese authorities managed to put an end to the Chai Jing event.

Why did the Chai Jing event end so quickly? This was because the POS for this online political protest was ruined by stringent internet control and influential allies' withdrawal. It was not difficult to find indications suggesting that the central government had changed its attitudes towards the Chai Jing event. China's two major political meetings—the NPC and the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (中国人民政治协商会议, CPPCC)—kicked off their annual sessions on 3 and 5 March 2015 respectively. Although *Under the Dome* had already become an internet sensation, there were not any deputy to the NPC and member of CPPCC who discussed topics referring to Chai's documentary publicly. Even the environment minister, Chen Jining, who praised Chai before, did not mention the film openly. The collective silence of more than 2,000 delegates on such a hot public debate seems rather strange. One logical explanation is that all NPC deputies and CPPCC members were under instructions not to comment on the Chai Jing event, which implies that China's top leadership were determined to quell this online political protest.

Moreover, an official directive issued by the CPD can serve as a clear indication that China's internet regulators had been well organized to suppress the Chai Jing event. On 3 March 2015, the CPD, one of the most powerful internet regulators, ordered China's websites to discontinue news reports about Chai Jing and her documentary. According to the official directive circulating online, the CPD required:

Media and websites of all types and levels (including Weibo, WeChat, and news portals) must absolutely discontinue coverage of the documentary “*Under the Dome*” and its creator, as well as reports, commentaries, interviews, and special topics that concern or extend to this film and its creator. Websites and services that have already carried content must take down special features or clamp down on

the backend. Discontinue reporting on discussions related to certain departments and work units concerned with this film. Strengthen the management of forums, blogs, Weibo, WeChat, and other interactive platforms, and resolutely block and delete speech that uses this as an opportunity to cast doubt or attack the government.⁸¹

Internet regulators raised control over the Chai Jing event to an extremely strict level. To begin with, acting under official instruction, ICPs, including Sina Weibo, carried out strict self-censorship to prevent users from accessing information about the Chai Jing event. On 7 March 2015, Sina Weibo began to remove Chai's documentary. One day later, supervisors of Sina Weibo put "*Under the Dome*" on the list of sensitive keywords. When searching "*Under the Dome*" on Sina Weibo, users were told that: "In accordance with relevant laws, regulations, and policies, search results for '*Under the Dome*' have not been displayed."⁸²

In addition, internet regulatory agencies cracked down on online protesters who called on people to take to the streets to protest the government's air pollution failures. For instance, on 8 March 2015, several activists gathered outside government house of Shaanxi province (陕西省) in Xi'an (西安), wearing anti-pollution masks and holding protest posters reading: "The government should take responsibility for fighting smog."⁸³ In the meantime, one organizer, whose Sina Weibo name was Wumian (无眠), posted photos of

⁸¹ Anne Henochowicz, "Clamping Down on "under the Dome"," 2015, accessed 5 May, 2018, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2015/03/minitrue-clamping-dome/>.

⁸² Feichangdao, "Sina Weibo Begins Censoring Searches for "under the Dome"," 2015, accessed 3 March, 2018, <http://blog.feichangdao.com/2015/03/sina-weibo-begins-censoring-searches.html>.

⁸³ Weiquanwang, "西安两网民举牌反“雾霾”被传唤 [Two Netizens in Xian Were Summoned to the Police Station for Protesting Smog Publicly]," *VOAChinese*, 2015, accessed 10 May, 2018, <https://www.voachinese.com/a/china-anti-smog-campaigners-20150311/2675561.html>.

their protest online and asked people to join them. Before long, his post was deleted by Sina Weibo and he was arrested by police.⁸⁴

Besides the strict internet control, the retreat of influential allies accelerated the demise of the online political protest. The allies of online activists retreated in the face of stringent internet control. First, the Chai Jing event lost the commercial media as influential allies. No sooner had the People's Daily removed *Under the Dome* from its website than many commercial media, like Youku, Tencent, and iQiyi, also removed the film from their website and deleted related posts on Sina Weibo. As a result, online protesters could not make comments and hold discussions about the film. Second, senior media professionals and famous actors, who used to provide considerable encouragement, no longer engaged in public discussions regarding the documentary. Very few openly condemned internet regulators for preventing netizens from viewing the film or criticizing the government. Some of them even deleted their previous comments and posts about the event.

Why did the Chinese central government change its attitudes towards the Chai Jing event? Perhaps it was because many online political protesters began to challenge China's development model and policy on reducing industrial overcapacity, which may hinder the CCP leadership's efforts to maintain the regime's political legitimacy. For one thing, there was an increasing number of online activists who strongly denounced China's political institution as being the root cause of the continuing environmental deterioration. As indicated in Section 7.2.4, some of them claimed that the government's inaction, political corruption, and the absolute and unchecked government power were the real culprit of air pollution. However, it was impossible for Chinese authorities to tolerate these criticisms because they may have given rise to serious political consequences that would threaten the legitimacy of the CCP's rule.

⁸⁴ Mingpao, "网民召全国反雾霾示威被捕 [Internet Users Who Called for National Anti-Smog Demonstrations Were Arrested]," *Lianhe Zaobao*, 2015, accessed 12 May, 2018, <https://www.zaobao.com.sg/wencui/politic/story20150310-455267>.

For another thing, more online protesters appealed to the government to listen to the voice of employees in polluting industries. Considering that the government was likely to fight air pollution at the expense of those workers' interests, they insisted that Chinese authorities should first introduce clear policies on protecting the jobless resulting from anti-pollution rather than rush into shutting down factories. However, this demand could not be accepted by the central government because the CCP leadership were increasingly anxious to solve the problem of serious industrial overcapacity by shutting down or scaling back factories and they were attempting to take advantage of the situation—Chai's documentary had aroused immense enthusiasm for fighting air pollution—to speed up the process of reducing overcapacity. The central government could not abide online protesters messing up its plan.

In summary, the Chai Jing event could not continue under conditions in which the POS was damaged by strict internet control and the withdrawal of Big Vs and commercial media. Online protesters were not powerful enough to challenge the Chinese government.

7.4 Conclusion

Under the Dome was one of the most influential anti-pollution documentary films in China. Since it was released online on 28 February 2015, the film went viral and sparked a national online environmental protest. This chapter has examined the course of the Chai Jing event and explored the reasons for its rise and fall.

This chapter finds that the rise of the Chai Jing event was attributable to the existence of the POS. First, elite divisions between the central government and its local representatives facilitated the online political protest. The Chinese central government attempted to tackle environmental problems and reduce industrial overcapacity, but local governments had considerable reluctance to conform to the central government's environmental policies.

Chai's anti-pollution documentary appeared on the Internet when the central government was striving to intensify environmental protection. The central government showed high tolerance towards internet users' acts of protest targeted at environmental issues, which reduced political risks faced by online protesters.

Second, lax internet control made it possible for the Chai Jing event to occur. Sina Weibo's supervisors did not enforce self-censorship to prevent users from obtaining information about the film owing to the political endorsement it had won from the central government. Conversely, energy giants and its backers, including the NEA and SASAC, did not have enough power to manipulate China's internet regulatory agencies into removing *Under the Dome* and the resulting online criticisms.

Third, many commercial media, senior media professionals, and entertainment stars were influential allies in the Chai Jing event. Nearly all Chinese video-sharing websites engaged in the dissemination of Chai's documentary. During the same time, a significant number of senior media professionals and entertainment stars came out strongly in favor of the Chai Jing event, which increased people's enthusiasm for environmental protection.

Finally, social networks on Sina Weibo contributed to the wide dissemination of *Under the Dome*. Further, these online social networks rapidly linked together internet users who felt deep concern about China's environmental problems. Constant interaction via online social networks speeded up the formation of collective identity. The community of city dwellers afflicted by smog spoke out against state-owned monopolies and the government's economic development policies. Conversely, the community of workers in polluting industries and their sympathizers voiced concerns about prospective unemployment caused by Chinese authorities' pollution crackdown.

Additionally, this chapter finds that the destruction of the POS gave rise to the end of the Chai Jing event. China's internet regulatory agencies coordinated efforts to crack down

on the online political protest because the central government could not tolerate widespread criticism of China's development model and opposition to its plan to reduce overcapacity. Sina Weibo was under instruction to remove Chai's film and the resulting content that criticized the government, and the internet police arrested some online protesters. Moreover, Big Vs retreated into silence, and commercial media outlets ceased coverage of the event.

The above findings deepen the understanding of China's online environmental protest. For one thing, holding online protests are an available method for Chinese internet users to prevent local government activities that could pose environmental risks. China's top leaders have realized that mounting environment pollution could threaten the political legitimacy of the communist regime. Besides, China's environmental pollution has become of great concern to ordinary people, especially those who live in polluted cities. As a result, online collective action targeted environmental issues are likely to receive the Chinese central government's positive responses and enlist the support of urban white-collar workers.

For another thing, China's online environmental protests cannot quickly bring about a fundamental transformation in China's political institution. The Chai Jing event is the largest online environmental protest over the past decade. Nevertheless, it failed to compel the Chinese government to make promises about reforming the political system and revising policies on overcapacity reduction. Online environmental protests may delay or stop local governments' industrial projects with potential environmental dangers. However, the degree of the central government's tolerance for online environmental protests is not unlimited. The central government does not allow online protesters to uncover the cause of environmental degradation from China's political system. Also, it does not allow online environment protests to challenge its authority.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

The thesis has presented a systematic analysis of online political protests in China. Existing studies that focused on the empowerment of the state by the Internet cannot explain the proliferation of political protests in China's cyberspace. Other studies that focused on how the internet's technical features, contradictions within China's political system, or participants' emotions caused online political protests fail to explain why the impacts of online political protests on China's political changes are so limited. By using the POS theory, this thesis has examined the cause of online political protests in China and their impacts on China's political changes.

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the main points of the previous chapters. First, it reviews the major findings of the study. Second, it assesses the implications of these major findings for the future development of China's online political protests and the process of China's democratization. Third, it provides a general overview of the important contributions of the research and proposes suggestions for further research.

8.1 Summary of Major Findings

The thesis finds that four key elements of the POS—elite divisions, internet control, influential allies, and social networks—determine the occurrence and development of online political protests in China. While combinations of these four elements cause online political protests, the disappearance of such elements will ruin online political protests' POSs, thereby leading to their demise. As a result, China's online political protests often fail to achieve their goals rather than causing meaningful changes to China's political system.

First, elite divisions within the Chinese government have important roles in facilitating China's online political protests. China's political elites refer to people who hold powers in significant government agencies. They include local government leaders and senior officials in the central government. Most online political protests in China are partly due to opportunities that were created by elite divisions between the central and local governments as well as elite divisions within the central government.

Conflicts of interest between central and local political elites have caused central-local elite divisions. Political elites, holding important offices within the central government, have direct responsibility for sustaining the CCP's rule. Preserving political legitimacy of the regime is their paramount and shared interests. The political legitimacy of the CCP's rule largely depends on government performance.¹ China's top leaders have anchored the regime's political legitimacy in economic growth and social stability. To motivate local government officials to devote their attention to economic development and social stability in their jurisdictions, the central government has used the rate of local economic growth and the ability to maintain social stability as two vital criteria to determine promotion of local government officials.²

However, to win promotion, many local government leaders tend to engage in the chase for fast GDP growth at the expense of the environment and human rights. As a result, local government leaders' obsession with GDP growth often gives rise to public dissatisfaction. Moreover, local government leaders often employ high-handed methods to deal with people's complaints in the name of maintaining social stability. Further, some local government leaders abuse entrusted power for private gain and use stability

¹ Zhao, "The Mandate of Heaven and Performance Legitimation in Historical and Contemporary China."; Zhu, "'Performance Legitimacy' and China's Political Adaptation Strategy."; Yang and Zhao, "Performance Legitimacy, State Autonomy and China's Economic Miracle."; Pan, *Out of Mao's Shadow: The Struggle for the Soul of a New China*, 323; Roskin, *Countries and Concepts: Politics, Geography, Culture*, 462; Laliberte and Lantegne, *The Chinese Party-State in the 21st Century: Adaptation and the Reinvention of Legitimacy*, 8-14.

² Wang and Minzner, "The Rise of the Chinese Security State."; Xie, "The Political Logic of Weiwen in Contemporary China."; Jing, Cui, and Li, "The Politics of Performance Measurement in China."

maintenance to crack down on people who protest at their misconduct. Local government officials' unjust exercise of power often gives rise to social instability. It is arguable that local elites do not devote as much attention to preserve political legitimacy as central political elites. Consequently, there are elite divisions between the central government and its local representatives.

The central political elites and local political elites may have different political positions on an online political protest due to the divisions between them. The central government may display more tolerance towards an online political protest aimed at the misconduct of local authorities or local officials because the CCP leadership are likely to exploit online political protests to grasp the reasons for popular discontent and they can build popular support by upholding online activists' appeals. Elite divisions between the central governments and its local representatives have opened up possibilities for online political protests. Online activists can enlist support of the central government in protesting against wrongdoings by local government officials. The central government's endorsements of an online political protest can reduce individuals' risk to participate in it. In the Lei Yang event, the central government expressed deep dissatisfaction over the Changping police's handling of the police brutality scandal. In the Watch Brother event, disagreements about how to deal with the alleged corruption of Yang Dacai existed between the central government and the local discipline watchdog. In the Chai Jing event, there were disagreements between the central government and its local representatives in terms of reducing levels of environmental pollution. These three case studies demonstrate the critical role of elite divisions in facilitating online political protests.

Elite divisions also exist inside the Chinese central government. China's state authority is distributed among state ministries and commissions with different functions. Political elites standing for different central government departments with competing interests may disagree on a given political issue. For online activists attempting to bring a complaint against one state agency's policy or its officials, they may make use of opportunities

created by elite divisions within the central government. Online activists may receive support from the CCP's top leaders or other departments.

Second, China's internet control tends to be capricious and incoherent, which creates possibilities for online political protests. In China, the central government has a tight hold on the power of regulating the Internet. Local governments have limited powers over the administration of China's cyberspace. The central government has set up a strict and sophisticated internet regulation regime—including internet access restriction, online content filtering, self-censorship, and online public opinion manipulation—and has been developing new internet technologies to improve its censorship ability. However, the sophisticated internet regulation regime does not necessarily ensure that internet control is effective.

China's internet control is affected by the commercial interests of Chinese websites. China's ICPs, especially social media websites, have to conduct self-censorship to delete online content deemed illegal by the government. However, there is no definite guideline for China's ICPs to decide what should be filtered out from their platforms. Prohibited topics listed by the Chinese government are too general and vague. Consequently, website supervisors have some space for interpretation of so-called unlawful information. There is fierce competition among China's popular websites. Web traffic is their core interests. If one website always carries out strict self-censorship, it is hard for it to promote its web traffic and compete with its rivals. Therefore, China's websites are not fully loyal to the government to censor themselves. More often than not, prior to receiving official instructions for internet regulators, they may allow their users to spread and discuss some politically sensitive topics.

Conversely, China's internet control can be influenced by divisions among China's internet regulators. Three groups of state agencies were involved in the operation of China's internet regulation regime before Xi Jinping administration's 2014 restructuring

of China's internet regulatory agencies. First, the MIIT and national telecom operators under its control were in charge of restricting internet access. Second, the MPS was another powerful player in regulating China's internet, mainly responsible for ensuring cybersecurity and cracking cybercrimes. The MPS created internet police forces, whose jobs encompass a wide range of responsibilities. They not only safeguarded computer network and internet systems but also blocked unwanted online content. Moreover, the internet police had the power to arrest internet users in the name of safeguarding national security and social stability. Third, many propaganda agencies comprise the last group of internet regulators. They were responsible for online ideology-related work. Two influential government agencies—the CPD and SCIO—were at the hub of China's propaganda system.

However, China's internet regulators had overlapping functional responsibilities and conflicting bureaucratic interests, which led to divisions among them. Internet regulators usually could not reach a consensus quickly on how to deal with breaking online events. They often could not rapidly issue an explicit official instruction for China's ICPs about whether to filter out information regarding a given political topic. The Chinese government uses internet control as a coercive measure to increase the cost of organizing and participating in online political protests. However, elite divisions among internet regulatory agencies reduce its deterrent effects on individual protest behavior. Before internet regulators are coordinated to make a unified action, China's internet users may have opportunities to protest online.

Since rising to power, Xi Jinping has attempted to reform China's internet regulatory agencies to deal with the fragmented situation in the country's internet regulation. On 27 February 2014, Xi's administration established the CCSILG to coordinate and supervise government agencies having a stake in internet regulation. Although Xi's reform enhanced the coordination among internet regulators, it did not effectively deal with the fragmented situation in China's internet regulation. Therefore, China's internet control

remained capricious and incoherent after 2014. In the Lei Yang event, divisions between the CPD and MPS caused censorship over online content about Lei Yang's death to constantly change.

Third, online social networks have created favorable conditions for China's online political protests. Sina Weibo is one of the most influential social media websites in China. It allows users to build social networks with no difficulty. Social networks on Sina Weibo reduce online protesters' cost of disseminating information to a negligible level. As online activists are able to spread visual information easily and cheaply, online spoof has become an important tactic of China's online political protest. In the process of online political protests, online activists create and spread various satirical images, songs, and videos to express discontent and draw public attention. In addition, online social networks facilitate the formation of collective identities in online political protests. Social networks on Sina Weibo link people together who have similar experiences or common political positions beyond geographical boundaries. By conversation and negotiation, they fix group boundaries to determine who is included in the group and plan how to proceed with their protest. The case study of the Lei Yang event demonstrated that many middle-class Chinese identified themselves with victims of police brutality. Finally, social networks on Sina Weibo lessen the difficulty of cooperation between online protesters, so that coordinating leaders are not indispensable in holding online political protests. The case study of the Watch Brother event demonstrated how online activists made joint efforts to carry out HFS to fight official corruption. There was no coordinating leader in this sleuthing process. It was a collective endeavor to probe and post Yang Dacai's corrupt practices on Sina Weibo.

Fourthly, influential allies, including individuals or organizations that have significant influence on Sina Weibo, are another contributory factor to online political protests in China. Sina Weibo has hundreds of millions of users. Those users who can attract a huge number of followers usually have substantial influence. High-profile Sina Weibo users

with millions of followers are powerful in shaping public opinion. Some of these high-profile Sina Weibo users are likely to express support for online protesters. First, Big Vs are often supportive of online political protest. Big Vs are individual users with many followers on Sina Weibo. Generally, Big Vs are made up of distinguished scholars, successful entrepreneurs, entertainment stars, and media professionals. They are China's cultural, intellectual, and business elites. Many Big Vs care about this country's future and have sympathy for the common people. They are willing to speak in favor of online protesters. Big Vs are located in the heart of their online social networks. They are able to determine which information will be disseminated to their followers and affect the decisions of their followers. Second, NGOs and commercial media outlets are two groups of organizations that tend to speak up for online political protests on Sina Weibo. Most of China's NGOs and commercial media have opened official accounts on Sina Weibo, and some of them are most-followed accounts. China's NGOs often provide support to online political protests to extend their social influence and gain reputation. Also, Chinese commercial media may report on potentially sensitive topics, such as government officials' corruption and misconduct, to boost commercial profits and gain more audience.

Finally, the Chinese government is capable of bringing an end to online political protests by destroying the POS. China is fundamentally an authoritarian state. The CCP's leadership keep a tight grip on the cadre personnel management. By appointing and removing leading personnel, the leaders of CCP can guarantee that the central government is fully capable of coordinating different government bodies to take unified action when necessary. Once the CCP's leadership perceive an online political protest as a challenge to their authority and rule, they can coordinate internet regulatory agencies to take joint action against the protest. Internet regulators will order websites to carry out rigid self-censorship, arrest online activists, and employ internet commentators to manipulate public opinion. Under strict internet control, online protesters' influential allies, like Big Vs and commercial media, tend to retreat into silence. As a result, online political protests

in China often end suddenly before achieving their goals, thereby hardly bringing about meaningful changes to China's political system.

8.2 Implications for State-Society Interaction in China

The above principal findings have two implications for understanding state-society interaction in China. On the one hand, various online political protests will continue in spite of the fact that the Chinese government has been refining its internet control regime by adopting new internet technologies and laws. This is because POSs continue to exist and can create conditions for online political protests. No matter how sophisticated censorship technologies become and no matter how complex the internet regulation regime, staging online political protests will remain an available method for ordinary people to fight for their interests.

However, to stage different types of online political protests requires China's internet users to overcome obstacles with varying levels of difficulty. For online activists who want to protest at violent police enforcement online, they will run into increasing difficulties due to the enlargement of the Chinese police's power since Xi Jinping rose to power. As discussed in Chapter 4, China's public security organ is one of the powerful internet regulators. When online activists attempt to expose police misconduct, social media websites are more likely to carry out strict self-censorship by deleting the information to avoid potential punishment. Moreover, the internet police, who patrol the Internet 24 hours a day, may intervene at once to prevent online protesters from diffusing messages about police misconduct. Therefore, it will become more difficult for online activists to hold online political protests like the Lei Yang event.

For online activists who plan to stage online environmental protests, they will also encounter mounting difficulties because China is undergoing a slowdown in economic growth. At his Two Sessions closing press conference (两会闭幕记者招待会) on 15

March 2019, China's Premier, Li Keqiang, acknowledged that China's economy was experiencing additional downward pressure.³ The decline in economic activity will impair the CCP's political legitimacy. Consequently, it is probable that the CCP's leadership will divert attention away from the country's environmental problems and relax the control on environmental pollution to boost the economy in the short term. Therefore, it will be more difficult for online protesters to gain support from the central government when launching online political protests about environmental issues.

However, the difficulty of holding online anti-corruption protests may change very little in the further. The CCP's leaders will continue to use anti-corruption as a tool to win support from the public and to crack down on political opponents. Moreover, government officials' corrupt practice is unethical individual behavior. Internet regulators may not cover up for corrupt officials by blocking their unwanted information. Meanwhile, websites, driven by commercial interests, will tend to take full advantage of government officials' scandals to attract more users.

On the other hand, online political protests cannot bring democracy to China in a short period. The capacity of the Chinese government remains powerful. The Chinese government is able to mobilize various resources to quell any online political protest that is deemed to be a potential threat to the CCP's rule. As a result, it is impossible to topple China's authoritarian regime by online political protests in the foreseeable future. However, every online political protest presents a challenge to the state's authority and awakens some people to pursue democracy and freedom

8.3 Significance and Areas for Future Research

³ Keith Bradsher, "China's Premier Acknowledges Economic Slowdown, Promising Tax Cuts," *The New York Times*, 2019, accessed 5 May, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/business/china-premier-li-keqiang-press-conference-economy.html>.

This thesis contributes to the existing literature regarding China's online political protests and political changes. There are three main contributions made by this thesis. First, the thesis has examined a social phenomenon that confuses many scholars—how online political protests frequently occur in a tightly restricted society. It challenges existing studies that have suggested that internet technologies empowered the Chinese government to succeed in stifling political mobilization and dissent on the Internet. It also analyzes the effects of online political protests on China's political change. The thesis offers an innovative analytical approach to study the rising online political protest in China and provides new thoughts for the future research of China's contentious politics.

Second, this thesis makes an important extension to social movement theory to studies on online collective action. Given the research on online collective action in China with the absence of a suitable theoretical framework, this thesis has modified the POS theory and demonstrated how the theory can be applied to analyze protests in China's cyberspace. Based on my review of the literature, I assess the thesis is among the first to attempt to use the POS theory to explain the rise and decline of China's online political protest. This thesis finds that the appearance of the POS contributes to the occurrence of online political protests and that the destruction of the POS leads to the end of online political protests.

Third, this thesis has practical significance for online activists in China. As the capacity of the Chinese government is still powerful, staging a protest to challenge the CCP's political legitimacy is dangerous and likely to end in failure. If online protesters want to win some real concessions from Chinese authorities, they have to express relatively narrow, specific complaints and work within the system rather than attempt to overthrow it.

Further research is required to extend the current studies. Future studies can consider WeChat, which allows users to set up group chats and may play an important role in

organizing online political protests. In addition, although WeChat is a relatively closed social networking platform, it has many public accounts (公众号). Articles released by these accounts are accessible to the public, and some can attract a great many comments. These articles and comments could be a useful source of information regarding public opinion during online political protests.

Finally, future studies can extend the theoretical model proposed by this thesis to examine other types of online collective action. The thesis focused on China's online political protests that opposed government policies or officials. In China, there are some online collective actions that aim to support authorities, such as online anti-Japanese and anti-American protests. What causes the rise and decline of these online collective actions is another matter worthy of further research.

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